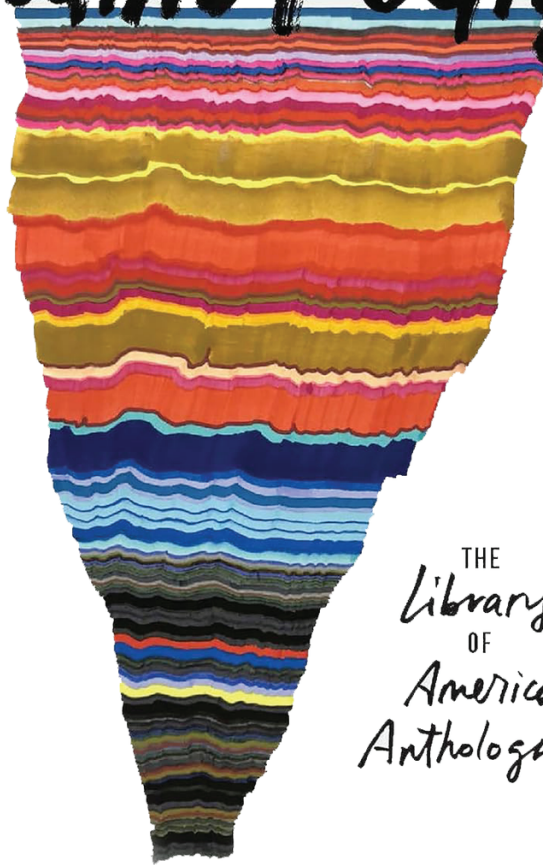


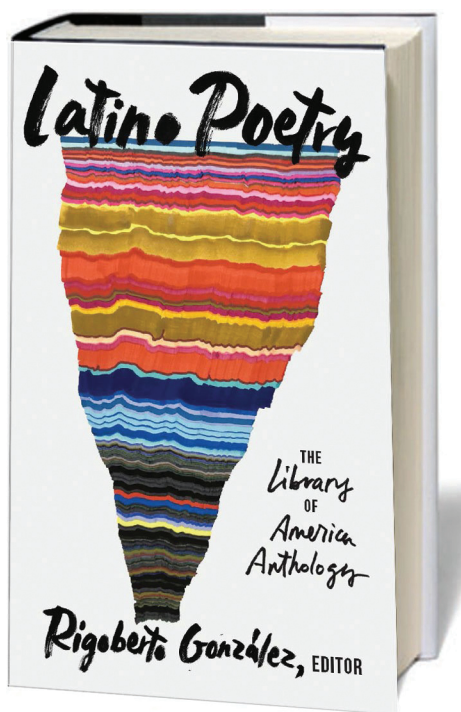
Latino Poetry



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—HÉCTOR TOBAR

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THE LIBRARY OF
AMERICA ANTHOLOGY

Rigoberto González, *editor*



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ANCESTRY AND IDENTITY

JOSÉ OLIVAREZ

Mexican American Disambiguation

after Idris Goodwin

my parents are Mexican who are not
to be confused with Mexican Americans
or Chicanos. i am a Chicano from Chicago
which means i am a Mexican American
with a fancy college degree & a few tattoos.
my parents are Mexican who are not
to be confused with Mexicans still living
in México. those Mexicans call themselves
mexicanos. white folks at parties call them
pobrecitos. American colleges call them
international students & diverse. my mom
was white in México & my dad was mestizo
& after they crossed the border they became
diverse. & minorities. & ethnic. & exotic.
but my parents call themselves mexicanos,
who, again, should not be confused for mexicanos
living in México, those mexicanos might call
my family gringos, which is the word my family calls
white folks & white folks call my parents interracial.
colleges say put them on a brochure.
my parents say que significa esa palabra,
i point out that all the men in my family
marry lighter-skinned women. that's the Chicano
in me. which means it's the fancy college degrees
in me, which is also diverse of me. everything in me
is diverse even when i eat American foods
like hamburgers, which, to clarify, are American
when a white person eats them & diverse
when my family eats them. so much of America
can be understood like this. my parents were
undocumented when they came to this country
& by undocumented, i mean sin papeles, &

by sin papeles, i mean royally fucked, which
should not be confused with the American Dream
though the two are cousins. colleges are not
looking for undocumented diversity. my dad
became a citizen which should not be confused
with keys to the house. we were safe from
deportation, which should not be confused
with walking the plank, though they're cousins.
i call that sociology, but that's just the Chicano
in me, who should not be confused with the diversity
in me or the mexicano in me who is constantly fighting
with the upwardly mobile in me who is good friends
with the Mexican American in me, who the colleges love,
but only on brochures, who the government calls
NON-WHITE, HISPANIC or WHITE, HISPANIC, who
my parents call mijó even when i don't come home so much.

DARREL ALEJANDRO HOLNES

Cristo Negro de Portobelo

It's when they see me naked that they finally believe
I'm from Panamá. The crucifix
hanging on my Black chest, underneath
the little hair I inherited from my father,
sweats as I perform what priests
and their laws call *unnatural acts*.
Only men grow body hair.
Only men are this dark and when
my hands finally darkened enough
to color even the blackest swans
I was sad to see them suddenly turn into wings,
plumed palms, hollow finger bones,
limp wrists. But then again, the struggle
of first flight against the moon's night
can be a freedom beyond heaven and
its wanting eternity. So now
rebellion is my new religion
or something else romantic and American
like a crownless king, perhaps an immigrant one
atop a throne, in native disguise.

RICHARD BLANCO

COMO TÚ / LIKE YOU / LIKE ME

{for the D.A.C.A. DREAMers and all our nation's immigrants}

*. . . my veins don't end in me
but in the unanimous blood
of those who struggle for life . . .*

*. . . mis venas no terminan en mí
sino en la sangre unánime
de los que luchan por la vida . . .*

—ROQUE DALTON, *Como tú*

Como tú, I question history's blur in my eyes each time I face a mirror. Like a mirror, I gaze into my palm a wrinkled map I still can't read, my lifeline an unnamed road I can't find, can't trace back to the fork in my parents' trek that cradled me here. *Como tú*, I woke up to this dream of a country I didn't choose, that didn't choose me—trapped in the nightmare of its hateful glares. *Como tú*, I'm also from the lakes and farms, waterfalls and prairies of another country I can't fully claim either. *Como tú*, I am either a mirage living among these faces and streets that raised me here, or I'm nothing, a memory forgotten by all I was taken from and can't return to again.

Like memory, at times I wish I could erase the music of my name in Spanish, at times I cherish it, and despise my other syllables clashing in English. *Como tú*, I want to speak of myself in two languages at once. Despite my tongues, no word defines me. Like words, I read my footprints like my past, erased by

waves of circumstance, my future uncertain
as wind. Like the wind, *como tú*, I carry songs,
howls, whispers, thunder's growl. Like thunder,
I'm a foreign-borne cloud that's drifted here,
I'm lightning, and the balm of rain. *Como tú*,
our blood rains for the dirty thirst of this land.
Like thirst, like hunger, we ache with the need
to save ourselves, and our country from itself.

Essay by Rigoberto González

IDENTITY IS a prevalent theme in Latino¹ poetry, expressed and negotiated through various emotional registers, depending on the poet's relationship to an ancestral homeland and to experiences as an ethnic minority in the United States. Over the centuries, understandings of identity have shifted significantly, leading to the nuanced conversations on the subject we now witness in contemporary poetry.

Starting in the early nineteenth century, national movements in Latin American countries mounted successful struggles to wrest independence from Spain in their respective countries. Broadly speaking, the founding of each nation unified populations by appealing to a collective sense of belonging. Official narratives of emancipation, new public institutions, and critical symbols of citizenship such as national flags helped foster a collective national ethos. Nevertheless, nation-building was in many places also predicated on the violent exclusion—tacitly and explicitly—of many sectors of the population, notably Indigenous people and descendants of the African diaspora. At the same time, this process allowed many Latin American and Caribbean countries to emerge on the global stage, to overturn systems of slavery and exploitation, and to attempt to rewrite their colonial histories—as the example of Haiti powerfully shows. For many members of these new nations, “home” began to have an identifiable place on the map. Later on, attachments to places of birth, perhaps inevitably, remained strong when Latin Americans, often as exiles, migrants, or refugees, moved to the United States in the twentieth century for various reasons—among them, repression related to the Cold War.

America and América were often positioned as opposing pulls or competing homelands. In the first half of the twentieth century, the inescapable metaphor of the American “melting

¹The authors of the contributions in this Reader have varying preferences in their use of terms referring to people in the U.S. with ancestors in the Western Hemisphere outside the United States and Canada—“Latino,” “Latinx,” and “Latine,” among them. We have left this terminological choice to the discretion of the individual authors.—The Editors.

pot” implied that to assimilate or to claim a fully American identity was to disavow one’s Latin American roots—even as Latinos were frequently perceived as foreigners, outsiders, or somehow mere interlopers in the U.S. In “The Mexico-Texan,” written in the 1930s, Américo Paredes offers a satirical account of seeming to belong nowhere: “In Texas he’s Johnny, in Mexico Juan, / But the Mexico-Texan he no gotta lan’.”

Members of subsequent generations may not possess quite so immediate an attachment to a Latin American homeland as their immigrant forebears felt. They can conceive of identity without privileging one particular identity over the other. The American self and the Latino self, the bordered North and South, the here and there of personhood need not be mutually exclusive, though this doesn’t mean a lack of conflict, confusion, or ambivalence. In the 2010s, writing in the spirit of Paredes’s tongue-in-cheek take on identity, José Olivarez, in his poem “Mexican American Disambiguation,” calls into question the preoccupation on both sides of the border with identity labels, along with skin color, language, citizenship status, class, and nationality:

...my mom
was white in México & my dad was mestizo
& after they crossed the border they became
diverse. & minorities. & ethnic. & exotic.
but my parents call themselves mexicanos,
who, again, should not be confused with mexicanos
living in México, those mexicanos might call
my family gringos, which is the word my family calls
white folks & white folks call my parents interracial.

Olivarez’s poem demonstrates how identity is situational at best. Far worse is the application of labels, which are fallible descriptors: those who subscribe to them, and their claims of intractable characteristics, perpetuate nothing more than stereotypes, generalizations, assumptions, and mischaracterizations. Olivarez’s poem was inspired by Idris Goodwin’s poem “How Idris Became Eddie, and Why It Matters,” whose speaker catalogues the various permutations, mispronunciations, and questions about his first name over the years in

encounters ranging from the curious to the hostile. In the end, such exchanges yield only a superficial knowledge of the person being asked to explain his name, though the poem's speaker learns plenty about himself. Similarly, "Mexican American Disambiguation" shifts the power from the query to the reply—a response in service not to such rudimentary questions as "Where are you from?," "What do I call you?," or "What are you?" but to the complex, mutable terrain of Latino identity that provides the ground for personal journeys.

Those personal journeys, however, are also political, engaging additional dimensions of identity such as gender, sexuality, and race. In contemporary poetry, nationality and American-ness have, for the most part, become secondary concerns in a social justice climate that is invested in reckoning with more pressing issues such as patriarchy, transphobia, homophobia, and anti-Blackness. The poem "Cristo Negro de Portobelo" by Darrel Alejandro Holnes, for example, approaches the latter two themes as a means of re-inscribing Blackness and queerness within Latino identity.

The Black Christ situates the speaker's ancestry in Panamá (where Holnes was born), home to this wooden sacred statue that the faithful believe is imbued with curative and magical powers. The spiritual healing sought by the poem's speaker, however, is acceptance within a religion that condemns "what priests / and their laws call *unnatural acts*"—that is, homosexuality. But just as it's possible for Blackness to exist within a figure that has been depicted conventionally as white, it's possible to exist as a gay man within Catholicism. This assertion is an act of rebellion, which the speaker embraces as "my new religion." Rebellion, the speaker continues, is also "something else romantic and American / like a crownless king, perhaps an immigrant one / atop a throne, in native disguise."

Latin America, like the U.S., has histories of slavery. The descendants of those once enslaved are as Latin American as the descendants of the colonizers and of the Indigenous populations of the Americas. Within a racialized U.S. context, descendants of enslaved people may call themselves African American; descendants of enslaved people from Latin America who are immigrants (or the children of immigrants) to the U.S. may call themselves Afro-Latino. Holnes's "crownless king"

might evoke the usage of “king” in the Black community to denote royal African ancestry. The “native disguise” perhaps makes reference to the Black Christ’s signature purple tunic, which symbolizes penance and mourning. Like Indigenous peoples, Africans were coerced into adopting Catholicism or were persuaded to convert as a means of survival. Moreover, in this image, we might note a compelling inversion of historical categories and hierarchies. With a hint of irony, in his gesture toward freedom or “something else romantic and American”—as if this were something easily done—the speaker embodies the syncretic image of the Christ, along with the complex and violent histories it encompasses, and in doing so, perhaps empties these categories of their fixed status in order to define himself anew. Undisguised, or undressed—which is how the speaker presents himself at the beginning of the poem—there’s only the Black body as a complete and autonomous entity that does not need to be embedded within a cultural project or supported by any other entity to exist.

The various manifestations of Latino identity imply that much effort has been exerted in disproving “the Latino” as a monolithic entity, so that it is now impossible to arrive at a clear picture of a community whose diverse members nonetheless share an ancestral language, overlapping colonial histories, and a Latin American heritage. Indeed, we should not expect to generalize conclusively or definitively about a heterogeneous group that is dynamic, consistently expanding and changing. In any case, the perception of Latinos from the outside is of little concern to Latino poetry, which has privileged perceptions from within. From the inside, declarations of solidarity, empathy, and political alliance between groups are at the heart of its collective strength and unity. Thus the Puerto Rican poet Martín Espada self-identifies as Latino, a term that others resist because it erases specific ancestries and histories. Espada’s position is as generous and optimistic as the attitude we find expressed in Richard Blanco’s poem “*Como Tú / Like You / Like Me*.”

Blanco dedicates this poem to “all our nation’s immigrants” but it is addressed particularly to the DREAMers, those young people who arrived as undocumented children, many of whom can only recall living in the U.S. Conferral of Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) status protects these

individuals, as of this writing, from deportation. (“DREAMers” refers to the Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors [DREAM] Act, legislation that if it were passed would grant them citizenship.) Blanco, the child of Cuban exiles, also had no control over the circumstances that guided his family’s journey into American life: “*Como tú*, I woke up to / this dream of a country I didn’t choose, that / didn’t choose me—trapped in the nightmare / of its hateful glares.”

By identifying with the DREAMers, the exiled speaker establishes kinship in the experience of displacement and the isolation that comes with the knowledge that one cannot return to the ancestral homeland. Blanco adds a striking element to this narrative, however, when he writes:

Like memory, at times I wish I could erase
the music of my name in Spanish, at times
I cherish it, and despise my other syllables
clashing in English. . . .

The moment addresses the uneasy coexistence of the speaker’s anglicized first name and a Spanish last name, a forced union not unlike the relationship between the DREAMer or exile and the U.S. But there is also here a gesture toward a desire to surrender to a blank-slate beginning, a commitment to a future unencumbered by the past. The unfairness of continuing to face the same obstacles as one’s parents or ancestors did can feel insurmountable. However, Blanco ends the poem on a more redemptive note:

. . . Like thunder,
I’m a foreign-borne cloud that’s drifted here,
I’m lightning, and the balm of rain. *Como tú*,
our blood rains for the dirty thirst of this land.
Like thirst, like hunger, we ache with the need
to save ourselves, and our country from itself.

“Our country” as a declaration of belonging, of citizenship (though the use of “citizenship” has fallen out of favor in Latino literature due to its denotation of exclusivity), is a radical pronouncement. As is the positioning of those with

conditional or (precariously) protected status as the inheritors of the promised land—those who will guide and influence the next ideation of America. So, too, the Latino community, now the largest minority population in the U.S., will exert a consequential impact on the ever-evolving concept of American identity.

Discussion Questions

1. José Olivarez's poem details how different labels are applied to people to describe the same thing ("my mom / was white in México & my dad was mestizo / & after they crossed the border they became / diverse"). Have you ever seen this happen in your own life, or to people you know? Are such descriptors complementary or contradictory?
2. Identity is often multifaceted, and people often identify simultaneously as members of distinct but overlapping groups. Re-read Darrel Alejandro Holnes's poem "Cristo Negro de Portobelo." What particular identities does he affiliate with, and how does he express or explore those identities in the poem?
3. Look at the similes that Richard Blanco uses in "*Como Tú / Like You / Like Me*," beginning with "Like a mirror." What do these similes share in common, and why do you think Blanco chose them when thinking about his own identity and those of "all this nation's immigrants," to whom the poem is dedicated?

Poems for further reading

Julia Alvarez, "All-American Girl"

Gloria Anzaldúa, "To live in the Borderlands means you"

Julia de Burgos, "Puerto Rico está en tí / Puerto Rico Is in You"

Maya Chinchilla, "Central American-American"

Sandra Cisneros, "You Bring Out the Mexican in Me"

Tato Laviera, "Mixturao"

Richard Garcia, "My Father's Hands"

Mariposa, "Ode to the Diasporican"

David Tomas Martinez, "The Only Mexican"

Jasminne Mendez, "Machete"

Gabriel Ramirez, "On Realizing I Am Black"

Lola Rodríguez de Tio, "La Borinqueña / The Song of Borinquen"

Brandon Som, "Chino"

Emanuel Xavier, "Madre America"

FIRST AND SECOND HOMES

JUAN FELIPE HERRERA

Exiles

and I heard an unending scream piercing nature.

—from the diary of EDVARD MUNCH, 1892

At the greyhound bus stations, at airports, at silent wharfs
the bodies exit the crafts. Women, men, children; cast out
from the new paradise.

They are not there in the homeland, in Argentina, not there
in Santiago, Chile; never there in Montevideo, Uruguay,
and they are not here

in *America*

They are in exile: a slow scream across a yellow bridge
the jaws stretched, widening, the eyes multiplied into blood
orbits, torn, whirling, spilling between two slopes; the sea,
black,
swallowing all prayers, shadeless. Only tall faceless figures
of pain flutter across the bridge. They pace in charred suits,
the hands lift, point and ache and fly at sunset as cold dark
birds. They will hover over the dead ones: a family shattered
by military, buried by hunger, asleep now with the eyes
burning
echoes calling *Joaquín, María, Andrea, Joaquín, Joaquín,*
Andrea,

en exilio

From here we see them, we the ones from here, not there or
across,
only here, without the bridge, without the arms as blue
liquid
quenching the secret thirst of unmarked graves, without
our flesh journeying refuge or pilgrimage; not passengers

on imaginary ships sailing between reef and sky, we that die
here awake on Harrison Street, on Excelsior Avenue clutching
the tenderness of chrome radios, whispering to the saints
in supermarkets, motionless in the chasms of playgrounds,
searching at 9 a.m. from our third floor cells, bowing mute,
shoving the curtains with trembling speckled brown hands.

Alone,

we look out to the wires, the summer, to the newspapers
wound

in knots as matches for tenements. We that look out from
our miniature vestibules, peering out from our old clothes,
the father's well-sewn plaid shirt pocket, an old woman's
oversized wool sweater peering out from the makeshift
kitchen.

We peer out to the streets, to the parades, we the ones from
here

not there or across, from here, only here. Where is our exile?
Who has taken it?

PABLO MEDINA

The Floating Island

. . . brillando contra el sol y contra los poetas . . .

—Heberto Padilla

There it is, the long prow
of the Caribbean, charging to break
the map's complexion.
It is a key, a crocodile, a hook,
an uncoiling question,
a stretch of sinews catching
dribbles from the continent
under which it will, forever, float.

The island mouth is smiling
or frowning, who can tell,
stuffed with waning intentions,
sugarcane and sand.

Such a little place, such
an island listing against sorrow
in the middle of the ocean's gut,
playing make believe
queen of brine, dressing up in green
and calling forth its poets for praise,
its leaders for chesty boasts,
inventing for itself a pantheon
of tropical saints, a vast
and profound literature,
an epic history to rival Rome's.

There it is, pretending it shimmers
over the heads of its people,
denying the terror it feels
when no one listens, denying
that it is always almost drowning,

that it cannot help anyone, least
of all itself, that it is only
a strip of dirt between morning and night,
between what will be and what was,
between the birth of hope
and the death of desire.

MAYRA SANTOS-FEBRES

Tinta

tinta para este poema sobre dejar una isla
de antiguos tontonmacoutes cielo mediocre
de nuevos tontonmacoutes
que ni para comer
ni para un solo sol de árbol ni maleza en combite.
no hay perros que ahuyenten el derroche
de avisar la llegada de tu muerte.
negra tinta que
sólo un carrefour hecho de agua esta vez
hecho del ojoloco y salitre y ola
aguante los mil pedazos de tu pecho de cartón
cuatro llantas
lo que flote negresa
lo que vuelva invisible esta locura.
los guardianes del cementerio tienen chalecos contra balas
y tú nada
ni una garza que suba al cielo
para hacer llover sobre la yola.
naufragar
sería un beso de las algas
una camita como el callo entre tus piernas
que ofreces
cuando no queda ni una lágrima qué beberse.
no existe
ni tinta hay
para describir
tu viaje.

MAYRA SANTOS-FEBRES

Ink

ink for this poem about leaving an island
old Tonton Macoutes fools mediocre sky
new Tonton Macoutes
nothing to eat
not even a single sun tree or mangrove in combite.
no dogs to chase away the excess
heralding your death's arrival.
black ink at
crossroads made only of water this time
of wild-eyes and saltpeter and waves
bearing the thousand pieces of your cardboard breast
four tires
 whatever floats negress
whatever makes this madness invisible.
the cemetery guardians have bulletproof vests
and you nothing
not even a heron rises to the sky to
make it rain on the yawl.
shipwrecked
it would be a seaweed kiss
a little bed like the moss between your thighs
your offering
when there is not even a tear left to drink.
 there's nothing
 not even ink
 to describe
 your journey.

Translated by Vanessa Pèrez-Rosario

Essay by Víctor M. Macías-González

LATINO POEMS often draw inspiration from places real and imagined. And though we should acknowledge, as the critic Norma Elia Cantú has pointed out, that contemporary Latino poetry is characterized by fluidity as well as influences crossing parochial, ethnic, and national boundaries, many Latino poets are careful to stress the importance of affective geographies in their work. The book *Querencia*, its title a term referring to a nostalgic love of place, examines how Latino and Indigenous writers from New Mexico incorporate this feeling into their poems.¹ Hardly alone in feeling this way, Latinos elsewhere similarly refer to *morriña*—homesickness.

This charged relationship to locale is common across various Latino communities and their poets and writers, regardless of whether such authors trace back their histories in the U.S. to conquest or immigration, the latter sometimes experienced as exile. From seventeenth-century epic poems to twentieth-century Chicano poetry and beyond, Latino poets have explored the shifting relationship between place and identity. Their poems delve into the complexity of living in an America that is also América, and—given the fundamental linguistic dimension of Latino experience—show how life is lived in English, *en español*, in Spanglish, or in Indigenous languages such as Nahuatl.

As Latino poets explore their sense of belonging, readers glimpse how Latinos feel both in and out of place, negotiating or navigating multiple identities in a process that ultimately informs what it is to feel *American*. Varying relationships to an ancestral homeland color the work of Latino poets, whether first, second, or *nth* generation. With certain poets, this ambivalent relationship to place is expressed through the disquietudes of otherness and alienation, as well as the compounded effects of racial and class differences. Others project outwards

¹ Vanessa Fonseca-Chávez, Levi Romero, and Spencer R. Herrera, ed., *Querencia: Reflections on the New Mexico Homeland* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2020).

to the longed-for homeland. Latino poetry thus presents a dual consciousness, a sense of there and here, as seen in Juan Felipe Herrera's "Exiles" (2008).

In the poem, Herrera addresses those who were forced to leave home due to South America's dirty wars in the 1970s and 1980s, more specifically those fleeing the repression inflicted by U.S.-backed right-wing military dictatorships in Argentina, Chile, and Uruguay. Herrera contrasts this experience with the alienation felt by Latinos in the U.S. who are "from here" yet feel displaced without having a claim on a home from which they are exiled. His metaphorical use of the Norwegian artist Edvard Munch's *Scream* (1893), signaled in the poem's epigraph, embodies the frustration and anxiety of those who, although born in America, do not feel accepted there. The key to understanding this sense of alienation throughout the poem is Herrera's insistence on the words *here* and *there*:

At the greyhound bus stations, at airports, at silent
wharfs
the bodies exit the crafts. Women, men, children;
cast out
from the new paradise.

They are not there in the homeland, in Argentina,
not there
in Santiago, Chile; never there in Montevideo,
Uruguay,
and they are not here

in *America*

They are in exile: a slow scream across a yellow bridge
the jaws stretched, widening, the eyes multiplied into
blood
orbits, torn, whirling, spilling between two slopes; the
sea, black,
swallowing all prayers, shadeless. Only tall faceless
figures
of pain flutter across the bridge.

In this opening, the newly arrived exiles, although sitting in “greyhound bus stations, at airports, at silent wharfs,” aren’t “there in the homeland” and are also “not here / in *America*.” The implicit question of where they are seems to hover over the stanza break before it is swiftly answered by an as-yet-unidentified speaker: “in exile.” Taken at face value, the proposition is darkly existential: to be in exile is to not fully exist, or to exist in a state of fundamental placelessness. This suggestion is only made starker by the ghostly, expressionistic descriptions of “tall faceless figures of pain [that] flutter across the bridge.” Yet in the fourth stanza, the speaker(s), materializing as a collective “we,” begin to articulate their own condition of disorientation as “the ones from here [. . .] only here” who watch those who are “not from here nor there” arrive.

In the matchbox-city description that follows, Herrera paints a portrait of profound, claustrophobic malaise: it is as if everything is a model of itself, a “miniature” landscape of “chrome radios” and “saints in supermarkets” where the “makeshift” prevails and one dies “awake.” These surroundings are only made more oppressive by the suggestion of another possible life, and the paralyzing inability to access it “without the bridge” that embodies the exiles’ firm connection with their homeland. The speaker(s) thus invoke a *querencia* for a community that does not include them. And despite an awareness of the trials faced by the newly exiled, this desire for belonging urges them to ask: “Where is our exile? / Who has taken it?”

This question perhaps reflects the poet’s own experience as the son of Mexican farmworkers growing up in the San Joaquin and Salinas Valleys. Indeed, for Herrera, as a second-generation Mexican American, being American negates the experience of being (unlike his parents) from elsewhere. During his time in college, in the midst of the Chicano Movement, he delved into the Indigenous cultures of Mesoamerica as a source of pride and inspiration, while becoming aware of broader anti-imperialist movements decrying U.S. involvement in Central and South America. Indeed in the poem, informed by this political education, Herrera contrasts the experience of Mexican Americans and Puerto Ricans—the internal colonies of the U.S. if we consider the territories of northern Mexico annexed by the U.S. in 1848 as such—with the experience of

Latin Americans who arrived in the U.S. during this period of his life.² In this way, the poem may suggest that these differing conditions of exile are interrelated through shared historical struggle, while being marked by affective and material differences.

In contrast to Herrera, the Cuban American poet, essayist, translator, and academic Pablo Medina was exiled to the U.S. from Cuba with his family as a child in 1960, a year after the Cuban Revolution ousted dictator Fulgencio Batista and brought to power the Communist Party of Cuba, led by Fidel Castro. Medina has addressed this experience in his writings, including his poem “The Floating Island” (1999), which begins with an epigraph from Cuban dissident Heberto Padilla’s (1932–2000) poem “A veces me zambullo” (Sometimes I Plunge, 1973), in which Cuba is cast as a white vessel “brillando contra el sol y contra los poetas” (shining against the sun, and against poets). Initially a supporter of the Revolution, Padilla ultimately grew disenchanted with the regime and was targeted as an internal enemy—enduring surveillance, repeated harassment, a show trial, imprisonment, and torture. His case became an international cause célèbre.³ Embittered, he sent his wife and young family abroad in 1979, joining them the following year. For Medina, figures like Padilla were representative of the repressive conditions that led to the exile of many Cuban intellectuals. In the poem, Medina ridicules Castro’s paradise: “pretending it shimmers . . . / denying the terror it feels / when no one listens, denying / that it is always almost drowning, / that it cannot help anyone, least / of all itself.” The poet implies that more than a boat or floating island, Cuba is a

² Here one might note that some Mexicans feel that immigrating to the U.S. is a reoccupation or return to lost territories; the trans-Mississippi U.S. is thrice Mexican as the historic northern half of New Spain, the northernmost extension of newly independent Mexico, and the mythical Aztec homeland of Aztlán.

³ Nick Caistor, “Obituary. Heberto Padilla: Poetic Symbol of Intellectual repression in Castro’s Cuba,” *Guardian*, October 14, 2000, <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2000/oct/14/guardianobituaries.cuba>; Heberto Padilla, *Fuera del Juego*, edición íntegra (Mexico City: Círculo de Poesía, 2009), 123–24, https://circulodepoesia.com/wp-content/uploads/2009/06/galeria_fueradeljuego.pdf.

sinking ship reminiscent of Padilla's "white vessel." Moreover, the island is described as "such a little place," "a strip of dirt between morning and night," heightening the reader's sense of its isolation and vulnerability, and possibly suggesting the added challenge of the U.S. embargo against it. The poem ends by invoking a squandered sense of possibility, situating Cuba

between what will be and what was,
between the birth of hope
and the death of desire.

The reader is left to wonder whether, like Padilla, Medina is mourning the dashed hopes of the Revolution.

A fellow Caribbean writer, the Afro-Latina poet, novelist, and essayist Mayra Santos-Febres, situates her oeuvre and Puerto Rican literature more broadly within the wider context of Afro-Caribbean writing. Through its expansive focus and the lush plurality of perspectives it engages—those of drag queens, migrants, Black women artists—her works exalt experiences that might otherwise be erased and forgotten.⁴ In *Boat People*, the book-length poem from which "Ink" ("Tinta" in its original Spanish version) is taken, contemporary contexts of migration and statelessness—consequences of the legacies of colonial violence—emerge as haunting reflections of the Middle Passage. The book brings to life a vast underwater city, and through its fragmentary, choral telling, an archive of lost bodies and lost voices is reconstituted and reclaimed. "Ink" focuses on the specific experience of Haitian émigrés, disparagingly called "boat people" in the media, a term first applied to Vietnamese refugees in the aftermath of the Vietnam War, and includes words in Haitian creole. Santos-Febres homes in on the desperate conditions of violence and hunger that drive Haitians to improvise a raft made of "four tires" in the hopes

⁴ See Jotacé López, "Mayra Santos-Febres: Afirmar la afrodescendencia en el Caribe y latinoamérica," *Latin American Literature Today* 23 (September 2022), <https://latinamericanliteraturetoday.org/es/2022/09/mayra-santos-febres-afirmar-la-afrodescendencia-en-el-caribe-y-latinoamerica-por-jotace-lopez/>.

of reaching the U.S. The poem suggests a process fraught with danger where many die or are arrested and sent back to Haiti, a context elucidated from the perspective of an anonymous Haitian woman, her body defenseless and vulnerable as she floats at sea, where “there’s nothing / not even ink / to describe / [her] journey.”

Ink frequently appears in Santos-Febres’s works. In the late 2000s her weekly literary radio program on the University of Puerto Rico’s Radio Universidad was titled *En su tinta* (In Ink), invoking ink as a common culinary metaphor where squid ink symbolizes one’s essence. Elsewhere, “ink” refers to the author’s voice, in relation to the embodied experience of writing by hand. Finally, for Santos-Febres, ink at once recalls the violence of racial categorizations and represents the beauty of Blackness.

This thematic section features the work of Mexican American, Cuban, and Puerto Rican Latinos, each with different experiences of displacement. Yet the themes of crossing and water emerge as two salient motifs. Herrera refers to the crossing of a physical and spiritual bridge that connects us to the homeland, while for Medina and Santos-Febres, the ocean, with its “gut” and its “wild eyes,” becomes quasi-sentient. Its formidable vastness renders those leaving or seeking to return defenseless against its will. At the same time, according to Santos-Febres, the ocean offers a perpetual sense of expansiveness that is fundamental to the Caribbean literary imaginary. Whether situated in or away from the “first home,” these poets each investigate a sense of “beyond” that, in the act of writing (and reading), becomes a tangible here and now.

Discussion Questions

1. What is the relationship between our sense of home and our identity? How does the interplay between *where we're from* (and everything this can mean) and *who we are* animate these poems? How might the tension between these two notions (homeland and self) inform a person's feeling of Americanness?
2. Juan Felipe Herrera's "Exiles" opens with a fragment of a diary entry by the artist Edvard Munch that seems to allude to his painting *The Scream*. Its associations with feelings of angst or deep, persistent anxiety seem to imbue the rest of the poem. What might be at the source of this anxiety and alienation? Overall, how does the degree of closeness between each poem's speaker and an ancestral home color the emotional landscape of each poem?
3. Where do you think the speaker of each poem is situated geographically? What is the "here" and "there" of each poem? Does the speaker seem to be telling their own story or that of someone else's? How does this embodied distance reflect or contradict metaphorical closeness with a homeland?
4. Describe the landscapes and settings depicted in each poem. How do the descriptions of landscape, and our experience of it, inform our understandings of the speakers' sense of belonging (or not) to a home they're currently in or one they've left behind? How might these descriptions illuminate a feeling of "*querencia*" or "*morriña*" (as defined in Víctor M. Macías-González's essay)?
5. How does the experience of "crossing" both physical and spiritual thresholds figure in these poems? Consider how this experience relates to notions of *border* and *diaspora*.

Poems for further reading:

Excilia Saldana, "Danzón inconcluso para Noche e Isla /
Unfinished Danzón for Night and Island"

Eugenio Florit, "Los poetas solos de Manhattan / The
Lonely Poets of Manhattan"

Marjorie Agosín, "Lejos / Far Away"

Javier Zamora, "El Salvador"

Alan Pelaez Lopez, "'Sick' in America"

Ray Gonzalez, "At the Rio Grande Near the End of the
Century"

Cynthia Guardado, "Parallel Universe"

VOICE AND RESISTANCE

LORNA DEE CERVANTES

Bananas

for Indrek

I

In Estonia, Indrek is taking his children
to the Dollar Market to look at bananas.
He wants them to know about the presence of fruit,
about globes of light tart to the tongue, about the
twang of tangelos, the cloth of persimmons,
the dull little mons of kiwi. There is not a chance
for a taste where rubles are scarce and dollars, harder.
Even beef is doled out welfare-thin on Saturday's platter.
They light the few candles not reserved for the dead,
and try not to think of the small bites of the coming winter,
irradiated fields or the diminished catch in the fisherman's
net. They tell of bananas yellow as daffodils. And mango—
which tastes as if the whole world came out from her womb.

II

Colombia, 1928, bananas rot in the fields.
A strip of lost villages between railyard
and cemetery. The United Fruit Company
train, a yellow painted slug, eats
up the swamps and jungle. Campesinos
replace Indians who are a dream and a rubble
of bloody stones hacked into coffins: malaria,
tuberculosis, cholera, machetes of the jefes.
They become like the empty carts that shatter
the landscape. Their hands, no longer pulling green
teats from the trees, now twist into death, into silence
and obedience. They wait in Aracataca, poised
as statues between hemispheres. They would rather
be tilling their plots for black beans. They would
rather grow wings and rise as pericos—parrots, poets,
clowns—a word which means all this, pericos, those

messengers from Mictlán, the underworld, where ancestors of the slain arise with the vengeance of Tláloc. A stench permeates the wind as bananas, black on the stumps, char into odor. The murdered Mestizos have long been cleared and begin their new duties as fertilizer for the plantations. Feathers fall over the newly spaded soil: turquoise, scarlet, azure, quetzal, and yellow litters the graves with the gold claws of bananas.

III

Dear I,
The 3' x 6' boxes in front of the hippie market in Boulder are radiant with marigolds, some with heads as big as my Indian face. They signify death to me, as it is Labor Day and already I am making up the guest list for my Día de los Muertos altar. I'll need maravillas so this year I plant caléndulas for blooming through snow that will fall before November. I am shopping for "no-spray" bananas. I forego the Dole and Chiquita, that name that always made me blush for being christened with that title. But now I am only a little small, though still brown enough for the—Where are you from? Probably my ancestors planted a placenta here as well as on my Califas coast where alien shellfish replaced native mussels, clams and oysters in 1886. I'm from the 21st Century, I tell them, and feel rude for it—when all I desire is bananas without pesticides. They're smaller than plantains which are green outside and firm and golden when sliced. Fried in butter they turn yellow as over-ripe fruit. And sweet. I ask the produce manager how to crate and pack bananas to Estonia. She glares at me suspiciously: You can't do that. I know. There must be some law. You might spread diseases. They would arrive as mush, anyway. I am thinking of children in Estonia with no fried plátanos to eat with their fish as the Blond turns away, still without shedding

a smile at me—me, Hija del Sol, Earth's Daughter, lover
of bananas. I buy up Baltic wheat. I buy up organic
bananas, butter y canela. I ship
banana bread.

IV

At Big Mountain uranium
sings through the dreams of the people.
Women dress in glowing symmetries, sheep
clouds gather below the bluffs, sundown
sandstone blooms in four corners. Smell of sage
penetrates as state tractors with chains trawl the resisting
plants, gouging anew the tribal borders, uprooting
all in their path like Amazonian ants, breaking
the hearts of the widows. Elders and children
cut the fences again and again as wind whips
the waist of ancient rock. Sheep nip across
centuries in the people's blood, and are carried
off by Federal choppers waiting in the canyon
with orders and slings. A long winter, little wool
to spin, medicine lost in the desecration of the desert.
Old women weep as the camera rolls on the dark
side of conquest. Encounter rerun. Uranium. 1992.

V

I worry about winter in a place
I've never been, about exiles in their
homeland gathered around a fire,
about the slavery of substance and
gruel: *Will there be enough to eat?*
Will there be enough to feed? And
they dream of beaches and pies, hemispheres
of soft fruit found only in the heat of the planet.
Sugar cane seeks out tropics; and dictates
a Resolution to stun the tongues of those
who can afford to pay: imported plums, bullets,
black caviar large as peas, smoked meats
the color of Southern lynchings, what we don't
discuss in letters. You are out of work.
Not many jobs today for high physicists

*in Estonia, you say. Poetry, though, is food
for the soul.* And bread? What is cake before
corn and the potato? Before the encounter
of animals, women and wheat? Stocks, high
these days in survival products: 500 years later tomato
size tumors bloom in the necks of the pickers.
On my coast, Diablo dominates the golden hills,
the faultlines. On ancestral land, Vandenberg shoots
nuclear payloads to Kwajalein, a Pacific atoll, where 68%
of all infants are born amphibian or anemones. But poetry
is for the soul. I speak of spirit, the yellow seed
in air as life is the seed in water, and the poetry
of Improbability, the magic in the Movement
of quarks and sunlight, the subtle basketry
of hadrons and neutrinos of color, how what you do
is what you get—bananas or worry.
What do you say? Your friend,
a Chicana poet

DIANA GARCÍA

Operation Wetback, 1953

The day begins like any other day.
Your daughter soaks a second diaper,
chortles as she shoves her soft-cooked egg
to the floor. Knees pressed to cracked linoleum,

you barely notice as your husband strokes
your belly. *Mijo*, he croons, prophetic plea,
then squeezes your nalgas as if to gauge
for ripeness. As he edges past, you notice

how his blue shirt blurs against the summer sky,
how sky absorbs his patch of blue, then empties.
Moments later, a truck groans, moves on,
carting rumblings of men headed for the fields.

Years later, you tell your son and daughter
of that anguished day, how green card migrants
vanished from the camps. You tell your children
how news gripped the camps of trains headed south

loaded with wetbacks. You never tell your children
what you can't forget: how you failed to squeeze back,
failed to wave good-bye, failed to taunt him
with *viejo sinvergüenza*. You never tell your children

how you forget this one man's voice—a voice
that brushed your ears, your hair, a path down your back—
a voice that blends with sounds of a truck
that never brought him home.

ARACELIS GIRMAY

The Black Maria

black the raven, black the dapples on the moon & horses,
black sleep of night & the night's idea,
black the piano, white its teeth but black its gums & mind
with which we serenade the black maria.

& the night, wearing its special silver, serenades us, too,
with metaphors for how the body makes: semen stars,
egg moon.

1600s: European ships heave fatly with the weight of black
grief, black flesh, black people, across the sea; the
astronomers think the moon's dark marks are also seas & call
them "the black maria."

Meanwhile, the Italian Riccioli, naming the seas
according to his language & sensibilities.
Riccioli naming the dark fur of the moon:

Mare Cognitum, Mare Crisium, Mare Fecunditatis; Sea that
Has Become Known, Sea of Crises, Sea of Fertility.
If it is up to Riccioli, then these are the names of three of the
black maria.

I call the sea "mar." I call the sea "bahri."
I call the moon "luna." But "far" is my word for both
you & the moon.

I heard a story once of a woman in the Sahara who, for years,
carried a single page of *Anna Karenina*
that she read over & over, the long combers of print
repeating like the waves of the black maria.

Language is something like this. A hard studying of
cells under a microscope,

cells on their way to becoming other things: a person,
a book, a moon.

Above the bowl, I crack the egg of this idea. Yolk from clear.
Which is It? Which is Not It?

Does “moon” name the whole thing, or just the side we
know, the side made dark with the black maria?

How language is an asha tree, a fool that grows
everywhere, a snake shedding its skin.
A bowl of teeth. A kitchen plate of shadow & ruins,
like the moon.

Moon says, “Please, god, crowd my loneliness with stars.”
But the star’s life is short compared to Moon’s.
There is always a funeral. Moon is always wearing the veil of
the black maria.

However pretty the sound, it was a misidentification,
to name the basalt basins & craters the black maria of
the moon.

If this is a poem about misseeing—Renisha McBride,
Trayvon Martin, Rekia Boyd,
then these are also three of the names of the black maria.

Naming, however kind, is always an act of estrangement.
(To put into language that which can’t be
put.) & someone who does not love you cannot name
you right, & even “moon” can’t carry the moon.

If this is a poem about estrangement & waters made dark
with millions of names & bodies—the Atlantic
Ocean, the Mediterranean & Caribbean Seas, the Mississippi,
then these are also the names of the black maria.

For days, the beautiful child Emmett swells into
Tallahatchie. Even now, the moon paints its face
with Emmett’s in petition. Open casket of the night,
somebody’s child, our much more than the moon.

Essay by Eliza Rodriguez

LATINE POETRY as we know it today comes from a long line of resistance to oppression in the Américas. Protesting the multiple forms of violence inflicted by the twin engine of colonization and racialized global capitalism, Latine poetic traditions have more often than not been multidimensional, combining art, politics, autobiography, history, prose, and poetry. Indeed, our greatest poets have written across these lines and worked as teachers, organizers, journalists, editors, and revolutionaries—raising their voices in solidarity to imagine and build movements for justice and peace.

The three poems included in this section—Lorna Dee Cervantes’s “Bananas”; Diana García’s “Operation Wetback, 1953”; and Aracelis Girmay’s “The Black Maria”—are very different in terms of style, content, and tone. Yet all three emerge from a Latine tradition of poetry as a record, as witness, and as the articulation of a resistant imagination grounded in the experiences and critical imaginations of Latine poets. This is poetry as *testimonio*, as call to action, as counterpoint to oppressive dominant narratives, and as invitation to the chorus of voices calling us together to make the world a more just, more liberated place.

“Bananas” was first published in *Chicana Creativity and Criticism* (1988), a landmark anthology co-edited by the scholar Maria Herrera Sobek and the novelist Helena María Viramontes. They brought together poetry, visual art, and essays in order to stress the critical function of creative work; the combination of these elements extended the argument that Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa had put forth through their editorial choices in their anthology *This Bridge Called My Back* (1983): that creative work is an important site of meaning-making and the production of knowledge about the world and our experiences of it. They called for a “theory in the flesh” that both emerged from and illuminated the experience of women of color. If we consider that *theory* is nothing more than a possible explanation of observed phenomena, and that creative work is a space where one can reflect on one’s own life

and make meaning from it, then genres like poetry are key theoretical sites where knowledge about power and resistance is conceptualized and articulated through body and breath.

"Bananas" was published in one of Cervantes's own publications only in 2006, when it was included in *Drive: The First Quartet*. The poet-persona in "Bananas" is Cervantes herself, addressing, in fragments of letters, an Estonian physicist named Indirek. This real-life epistolary friendship began when Indirek, inspired by her poetry, wrote to her. The course of their correspondence included a debate of sorts about the nature of poetry itself and its relation to what goes on in the world.

A five-part poem, "Bananas" travels across the globe and across the twentieth century. The poem's numbered sections take us to varied locales marked by colonial violence, political repression, and environmental disaster. In section II, Cervantes evokes the slaughter of striking workers in Ciénega, Colombia, known as the Banana Massacre—a mass killing carried out by the Colombian army against workers striking against the United Fruit Company. She depicts the episode in descriptions as lush as they are lurid—"stench / permeates the wind as bananas, black on the stumps, char / into odor," while "Feathers fall over the newly spaded soil: turquoise / scarlet, azure, quetzal."

In section IV, Cervantes brings the reader face-to-face with the "desecration of the desert" in the Navajo Nation. Here uranium mining during the Cold War led to thousands of Diné workers and others falling ill and dying (despite the known risks of lung cancer associated with uranium extraction), as well as the long-lasting poisoning of Native water, food, and medicinal sources. In the final stanza, Cervantes names the U.S.-occupied Kwajalein Atoll in the Pacific—"where 68% / of all infants are born amphibian or anemones," possibly alluding to the effects of U.S. nuclear tests on neighboring Bikini Atoll in the 1940s and 1950s (with the atoll's population forcibly relocated). Here, Cervantes allows for an uneasy relationship between poetry and horror, beauty and tragedy, to come to the fore.

The evocative valence of bananas changes across the length of the poem: they are "yellow as daffodils," deadly "gold claws," and the key ingredient in banana bread (which the poet-speaker

wants to ship to Estonia). Bananas become a symbol for the interconnected networks of trade and capital, stand-ins for the “banana republics” of the Global South, where legacies of colonialism, imperialism, and extractivism foster extreme precarity and violence. We come to understand such episodes as not only affectively but also materially interconnected through networks that extend within and beyond the bounds of the poem. If one traces the lineage of the United Fruit Company (later Chiquita) banana, the violence perpetrated in 1928 in Colombia repeats itself in Guatemala, where the overthrow of President Jacobo Árbenz in 1954 at the behest of this same company led to the genocide of approximately 200,000 Indigenous Guatemalans during its decades-long civil war. One might also note how Dole (UFC’s competitor for many years, named in section III), whose founder participated in the overthrow of the Kingdom of Hawaii, paving the way for its annexation, was responsible for bankrolling paramilitaries that slaughtered striking workers in Colombia in the 2000s. The banana emerges as a metaphor made real—the common thread of histories of domination and empire that extend into the present.

In the last lines of section IV—“Old women weep as the camera rolls on the dark / side of conquest. Encounter rerun. Uranium. 1992.”—Cervantes once more evokes this sense of repetition. Here, uranium poisoning in the ’60s becomes an extension of the same colonial apparatus that in 1868 first established the Navajo reservation, or that in 1492 marked the beginning of genocidal campaigns in the Americas: “Campesinos / replace Indians who are a dream and a rubble / of bloody stones hacked into coffins: malaria, / tuberculosis, cholera, machetes of the jefes” (lines from section II). Centuries of conquest throughout the American continent, and the parallel histories of extermination that emerge within it, are made starkly visible through the condensed technology of the poetic line where “Sheep nip across / centuries in the people’s blood.”

Moreover, through the interplay between myth and fact, where the slain campesinos are “poised as / statues between hemispheres” and then “pericos,” “those messengers from Mictlán, the underworld, where ancestors / of the slain arise with the vengeance of Tláloc,” we begin to read these histories against the backdrop of a poetic order. Here, the parallel

trajectories of Mexico and Colombia merge in the mythological underworld. We might similarly note the intertextual richness of the poem: how the description of the Banana Massacre is reminiscent of Gabriel García Márquez's magic realist treatment of the same episode in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, or how the poem recalls Pablo Neruda's "La United Fruit Co.," which denounces the company for how it has "rebaptized these countries / banana republics."

The poem thus opens up a variety of avenues through which we can expand our understanding of the past and shift our relationship to it. In this delicate compression and reorientation of historical time, or inversely, in its projection into the mythical, we might become doubly aware of how the consequences of past events can sprout like the "tomato / size tumors [that] bloom in the necks of the pickers" some "500 years later." But we might also be made gently aware of the possibility of lyrical reinvention and the potential that poetry bears for the spirit, "the yellow seed / in air as life is the seed in water." Perhaps Cervantes is proposing that poetic language is a generative force that blooms just as quickly.

At the same time, the poem raises questions about the possibility that poetry can defeat the material conditions of suffering. When Indirek implies that "*Poetry, though, is food / for the soul*," Cervantes responds with an outraged "And bread? What is cake before / corn and the potato?" questioning the very claim that poetry matters at all—though her perspective on this question is reconsidered (or deepens) at the poem's conclusion. These closing lines I return to again and again.¹ The final invitation, "What do you say? Your friend, // a Chicana poet," not only brings us into a personal relationship with the poet but awakens us to the possibility for intimacy that poetry makes possible. The realm of connection represented by the epistolary exchange with Indirek now expands to include the reader in this closing gesture of friendship. In the same way that bananas come to stand in for global networks of trade and centuries of colonial violence through the desire that they be

¹ See my "'The Poetry of Improbability': Lorna Dee Cervantes's Global Chicana Feminism," in *Stunned into Being: Essays on the Poetry of Lorna Dee Cervantes*, ed. Eliza Rodriguez (San Antonio: Wings Press, 2012), 136–54.

shipped and sold across the globe, they also become a powerful metaphor of solidarity and sustenance.

And if beauty and love are improbable in the face of so much violence and pain, they are nonetheless visible in the smallest subatomic structures (hadrons and neutrinos), elemental units of what makes the world. The “poetry of Improbability” becomes a site of activated potential—and intention—“what you do is what you get.” Here, poetry is not judged by its capacity to effectuate change on a tangible level but instead is justified in its very intangibility, in its being made from the frenetic energy of change itself—“quarks and sunlight.” Here the “magic in the Movement” becomes, perhaps, the beauty in the struggle.

Like Cervantes, Diana García draws on her identity as a Chicana to articulate her politics and poetics. Originally published in García’s book *When Living Was a Labor Camp* (2000), “Operation Wetback, 1953” is another instance of poetry as history and as personal protest against racist dehumanization and violence. It details a moment of domestic intimacy between a pregnant woman and her husband just before he goes off to work in the fields for the day—but is never seen again. The title refers to the largest mass deportation program in American history, which targeted workers of Mexican descent. Indeed, its very name is a racist slur against people of Mexican origin, hateful speech that justifies the dehumanization of Mexican and Mexican American people. More than one million workers were kidnapped and forced onto planes, trains, buses, and in some cases boats, to be dropped hundreds if not thousands of miles away, with nothing more than the clothes on their backs and whatever was in their pockets. Often these people were sent to parts of Mexico where they were not originally from. It is widely acknowledged that countless American citizens as well as migrants with legal authorization to work were forcibly deported as well. García based this poem on her own family history, particularly the story of her uncle, who was only able to return to California thirty years later, where he found out that his wife had died in the interim.

Indeed, this poem is simultaneously about remembering this forgotten history and the pain of forgetting it in the first place. These losses rewrite the histories of families and

are carried through generations even in their unremembered forms: “You never tell your children / what you can’t forget [. . .] how you forget this one man’s voice.” What you can’t forget is that you *do* forget. The pain of that contradiction is at the heart of this resounding but little-known history. By focusing on a series of intimate moments and amplifying their textures and sounds through distilled, painterly gestures, a “blue shirt [that] blurs against the summer sky” and a sky that “absorbs his patch of blue, then empties,” García brings to full effect the quiet, daily ways in which historical tragedy bears on the personal. The unfathomable grief of mass displacement is made tangible through the lyrical reconfiguration of a moment long gone. Unlike Cervantes’s energetic compression of a vast history of conquest, García’s poem reckons with the historical by halting it to near stillness, offering an expansion of the particular that helps us to see the whole. The past is distilled into a stark, singular here-and-now, and we’re made to understand how although the moment the poem depicts has gone like the “voice that blends with sounds of a truck / that never brought him home,” it continues to haunt the present.

Drawing on her Puerto Rican, Eritrean, and African American roots, Aracelis Girmay brings an Afro-Latine perspective to this question of poetry and resistance. “The Black Maria” shares its title with not only the book in which it appears but also a poem that immediately precedes it in the collection; together they invoke the historical roots and consequences of anti-Blackness around the world. The book was in part inspired by the 2013 Lampedusa tragedy in which nearly four hundred refugees from Eritrea and Somalia crossed the Sahara through Libya, only to drown off the coast of Italy. Not mentioned directly in this particular poem (though it is referenced elsewhere in the book), the Lampedusa tragedy casts a backwards shadow on the history of the Middle Passage, which reverberates in this contemporary wreckage. The title is a reference to the plural of the Latin *mare*, which means sea. The poem directly refers to the (mis)naming of lunar valleys and craters as seas; the assumption that to name something is therefore to know its true nature recalls the biblical mastery of Adam naming everything in the world as he comes to know it. This form of epistemic mastery is characteristic of European

knowledge production, evident in historical global exploration and subsequent colonization, not least the transatlantic slave trade, embedded in the structures of global capitalism that persist to this day. Girmay makes these connections poignantly: “European ships heave fatly with the weight of black / grief, black flesh, black people, across the sea; the / astronomers think the moon’s dark marks are also seas & call / them ‘the black maria.’” Notice that the ships are described as European rather than as slave ships—naming them accurately: they are from Europe, owned by Europeans—correctly situating the source of this violence.

Fast forward to the twentieth century, and “Black Maria” becomes an informal name for police vans used in mass arrests across the early and mid-twentieth century in the U.S.—resonating, in turn, with the nationwide anti-Black police violence that catalyzed the Black Lives Matter movement in the 2010s. The racist and violent murders of Black people by police and civilians in the name of self-defense are read against a history of white supremacy and its systemic consequences: mass incarceration and state-sanctioned murder. Girmay writes: “If this is a poem about misseeing—Renisha McBride, / Trayvon Martin, Rekia Boyd, / then these are also three of the names of the black maria.” Renisha McBride, a nineteen-year-old Black woman, was shot in the face through a locked screen door by a white man after she came to his front porch seeking help after a car accident in 2013. Trayvon Martin, a seventeen-year-old Black high school student, was murdered while he was walking in his father’s gated community by a Latino vigilante/neighborhood watch captain in 2012. Rekia Boyd, a twenty-two-year-old Black woman, was shot and killed by an off-duty white police detective in 2012 who fired his weapon from his vehicle into a small group of young Black people—Boyd and her friends. By naming Renisha McBride, Trayvon Martin, and Rekia Boyd, the poem resonates against the contemporary backdrop of the “Say Their Names” projects that intersect with the goals of Black Lives Matter. Naming them as individual people keeps our focus on their lives and how they were cut short by racist state-sanctioned violence.

The poem deals complexly with the misperception and misnaming of Blackness that are both the cause and consequence

of the dehumanization of Black people. Language and naming are inevitably vectors of power and violence: “someone who does not love you cannot name / you right, & even ‘moon’ can’t carry the moon.” Despite the importance and insistence on naming, language is always insufficient in that it carries with it the omissions and violences of official histories.

As in “Bananas,” parallel histories are delicately interwoven and made to touch through the gaps in the archive. These connections are paradoxically made possible through language itself, the syntactic reorientations of the poetic line, like the “Sheep [that] nip across / centuries” or the metaphor that allows two disparate realities to meld or to be put on a different scale—“semen stars, / egg moon” and “hemispheres / of soft fruit.” Girmay’s poem warns against language that extends from a solely empirical understanding of the world “A hard studying of / cells under a microscope,” and the violent histories this mode of knowledge production carries with it. At the same time, she also exalts language’s potential for wonder and reinvention. In the waxing lyrical propositions of the poem, language emerges, with all its irrational, generative power, as “an asha tree, a fool that grows / everywhere,” as a counterpoint to the dark side of the Enlightenment, the “side we / know, the side made dark with the black maria.”

Girmay ends the poem enlacing these different black marias and returning to the limits of language while at the same time multiplying the meanings of the black maria: “If this is a poem about estrangement & waters made dark / with millions of names & bodies—the Atlantic / Ocean, the Mediterranean & Caribbean Seas, the Mississippi, / then these are also the names of the black maria.” These bodies of water are unmarked graves for Black people killed by whites in the name of colonial expansion, slavery, racism, and contemporary neocolonial dynamics of mass displacement. The closing lines of the poem memorialize Emmett Till, a fourteen-year-old Black boy who in 1955 was kidnapped, tortured, and lynched, his body dumped by his attackers into the Tallahatchie River in Mississippi. His mother chose an open casket to expose the horrifically racist violence of her son’s lynching. The poem’s final sentence stresses the ways that looking into the night (a shifting metaphor of grief and of darkness that allows us to see

the moon and the stars) is also a way of looking into the truth of the experiences of Blackness that exceeds the language that we have to talk about it: "Open casket of the night, / somebody's child, our much more than the moon." The ugliness of the violence done to "somebody's child" is recalled in the same breath as the possibilities in refiguring how we remember him. What would it mean to be "our much more than the moon?"

These three poems are stirring examples of how poetry might offer a polysemous understanding of our past and our present. It can provide enough ambiguity and paradox so that several truths can coexist. In this, it may unlatch modes of interacting with our material reality that shift the focus from what is to what can be, "cells on their way to becoming other things: a person, / a book, a moon"—a feat necessary for reimagining politics, the relations of power that structure our everyday lives. It may raise more questions than it answers, but those questions are generative; they create more questions, and perhaps those questions have multiple answers. And although poetry cannot take the place of organized struggle, advocacy, or political action, maybe one of the things it can claim to do is put us into a different kind of relation with one another, where the poem is written anew in the ears of each reader.

As Cervantes reminds us:

...how what you do
is what you get—bananas or worry.
What do you say? Your friend,

a Chicana poet

Discussion Questions

1. What are some of the historical episodes named or evoked in each of the poems? With the help of the discussion leader, attempt to place them on a timeline and map. Do they seem connected to one another? In your view, do they relate to issues we face today? And if so, how?
2. Identify the speaker in each poem. Who is the “I”? Are they situated within the episodes of struggle being relayed by the poem, or are they on the outside looking in? How do these events affect the speaker? In turn, who is the speaker addressing in the poem? How does the function of the “you” differ in “Bananas” from that in “Operation Wetback, 1953”? What might the relationships between subject, speaker, and reader reveal about poetry’s relation to the political?
3. All three poems bring historical tragedy into the realm of the personal—either by invoking a direct experience (as in “Operation Wetback, 1953”) or by recounting events that the speaker feels a strong connection to but did not personally experience or witness. How does history bear on everyday life in the poems? How does history color and impact seemingly mundane or intimate details?
4. In “The Black Maria,” Aracelis Girmay alludes to “cells under a microscope,” while in “Bananas,” Lorna Dee Cervantes speaks to the “quarks and sunlight [. . .] hadrinos and neutrinos of color.” In these and other instances the poems evoke scientific language to color their retellings of history. According to these two poets, what place might scientific inquiry hold in relation to poetry as a way of understanding our place in the world? In what ways do the poets’ treatment of this relationship differ? What relationships are they establishing between how we choose to understand the world and systems of slavery,

colonialism, and other forms of oppression? What answers might poetry provide here?

5. What is the relationship between poetry and action as explored in these poems? What role does the poet play in political struggle? What kind of answers can poetry provide (if any) to those seeking to transform social conditions? How might the poems imagine alternatives to repressive social and political conditions?

Poems for further reading

Clemente Soto Véléz, “from *The Wooden Horse*”

Daniel Borzutzky, “Let Light Shine Out of Darkness”

Vanessa Angélica Villareal, “A Field of Onions: Brown Study”

Frank Lima, “Oklahoma America”

Rodolfo “Corky” Gonzales, “I Am Joaquin”

Carolina Ebeid, “Punctum / Image of an Intifada”

Raúl R. Salinas, “Unity Vision”

LANGUAGE / LENGUAJE

FRANCISCO X. ALARCÓN

Un Beso Is Not a Kiss

un beso
es una puerta
que se abre
un secreto
compartido
un misterio
con alas

un beso
no admite
testigos
un beso can't
be captured
traded
or sated

un beso
is not just
a kiss—
un beso is
more dangerous
sometimes
even fatal

FRANCISCO X. ALARCÓN

In Xóchitl In Cuicatl

cada árbol
un hermano
cada monte
una pirámide
un oratorio

cada valle
un poema
in xóchitl
in cuicatl
flor y canto

cada nube
una plegaria
cada gota
de lluvia
un milagro

cada cuerpo
una orilla
al mar
un olvido
encontrado

todos juntos:
luciérnagas
de la noche
soñando
el cosmos

In Xóchitl In Cuicatl

every tree
a brother
every hill
a pyramid
a holy spot

every valley
a poem
in xóchitl
in cuicatl
flower and song

every cloud
a prayer
every drop
of rain
a miracle

every body
a seashore
a memory
at once lost
and found

we all together—
fireflies
in the night
dreaming up
the cosmos

PEDRO PIETRI

The Broken English Dream

It was the night
before the welfare check
and everybody sat around the table
hungry heartbroken cold confused
and unable to heal the wounds
on the dead calendar of our eyes
Old newspapers and empty beer cans
and Jesus is the master of this house
Picture frames made in Japan by the U.S.
was hanging out in the kitchen
which was also the livingroom
the bedroom and the linen closet
Wall to wall bad news was playing
over the radio that last week was stolen
by dying dope addicts looking for a fix
to forget that they were ever born
The slumlord came with hand grenades
in his bad breath to collect the rent
we were unable to pay six months ago
and inform us and all the empty
shopping bags we own that unless
we pay we will be evicted immediately
And the streets where the night lives
and the temperature is below zero
three hundred sixty-five days a year
will become our next home address
All the lightbulbs of our apartment
were left and forgotten at the pawnshop
across the street from the heart attack
the broken back buildings were having
Infants not born yet played hide n seek
in the cemetery of their imagination
Blind in the mind tenants were praying
for numbers to hit so they can move out

and wake up with new birth certificates
The grocery stores were outnumbered by
funeral parlors with neon signs that said
Customers wanted No experience necessary
A liquor store here and a liquor store
everywhere you looked filled the polluted
air with on the job training prostitutes
pimps and winos and thieves and abortions
White business store owners from clean-cut
plush push-button neat neighborhoods
who learn how to speak spanish in six weeks
wrote love letters to their cash registers
Vote for me! said the undertaker: I am
the man with the solution to your problems

To the united states we came
To learn how to misspell our name
To lose the definition of pride
To have misfortune on our side
To live where rats and roaches roam
in a house that is definitely not a home
To be trained to turn on television sets
To dream about jobs you will never get
To fill out welfare applications
To graduate from school without an education
To be drafted distorted and destroyed
To work full time and still be unemployed
To wait for income tax returns
and stay drunk and lose concern
for the heart and soul of our race
and the climate that produce our face

To pledge allegiance
to the flag
of the united states
of installment plans
One nation
under discrimination
for which it stands
and which it falls

with poverty injustice
and televised
firing squads
for everyone who has
the sun on the side
of their complexion

Lapiz: Pencil
Pluma: Pen
Cocina: Kitchen
Gallina: Hen

Everyone who learns this
will receive a high school equivalency diploma
a lifetime supply of employment agencies
a different bill collector for every day of the week
the right to vote for the executioner of your choice
and two hamburgers for thirty-five cents in times square

We got off
the two-engine airplane
at idlewild airport
(re-named kennedy airport
twenty years later)
with all our furniture
and personal belongings
in our back pockets

We follow the sign
that says welcome to america
but keep your hands
off the property
violators will be electrocuted
follow the garbage truck
to the welfare department
if you cannot speak english

So this is america
land of the free
for everybody

but our family
So this is america
where you wake up
in the morning
to brush your teeth
with the home relief
the leading toothpaste
operation bootstrap
promise you you will get
every time you buy
a box of cornflakes
on the lay-away plan
So this is america
land of the free
to watch the
adventures of superman
on tv if you know
somebody who owns a set
that works properly
So this is america
exploited by columbus
in fourteen ninety-two
with captain video
and lady bird johnson
the first miss subways
in the new testament
So this is america
where they keep you
busy singing
en mi casa toman bustelo
en mi casa toman bustelo

PEDRO PIETRI

Sueño en inglés goleta

Era la noche
antes del cheque del mantengo
y todos nos sentamos alrededor de la mesa
hambrientos desalentados fríos confundidos
e incapaces de curar las heridas
en el calendario muerto de nuestros ojos
Periódicos viejos y latas de cerveza vacías
y Jesús es el amo de esta casa
En la cocina que era
también la sala
el dormitorio y la alacena
colgaban cuadros hechos en el Japón por los e.u.
Tocaban malas noticias de pared a pared
por el radio que se robaron la semana pasada
unos tecatos moribundos buscando la cura
para olvidar que hubieran nacido alguna vez
Llegó el señor del arrabal con su mal aliento
de granadas de mano a cobrar la renta
que no pudimos pagar hace seis meses
y nos informó a nosotros
y a los shopping bags vacíos que poseemos
que si no pagábamos nos pondría de patitas en la calle
y que las calles donde habita la noche
y la temperatura cae a bajo cero
trescientos sesenta y cinco días al año
sería nuestra próxima dirección postal
Todas las bombillas del apartamento
fueron abandonadas y olvidadas en la casa de empeño
al cruzar la calle del ataque al corazón
que sufrían los edificios de espaldas quebradas
Niños no nacidos todavía jugaban al esconder
en el cementerio de sus imaginaciones
Inquilinos ciegos de la mente rezaban
para pegarse en la bolita y mudarse

y despertar con nuevos certificados de nacimiento
Los colmados eran sobrepasados por
funerarias anunciándose con letreros de neón
Se necesitan clientes No se exige experiencia previa
Una licorería por aquí y otra licorería
dondequiera que miraras llenaban el aire
enrarecido con prostitutas en entrenamiento de trabajo
chulos y atómicos y pillos y abortos
Los dueños de tienda blancos
de respetables lujosos barrios bien
que aprenden a hablar español en seis semanas
le escribían cartas de amor a sus cajas registradoras
¡Voten por mí! dijo el enterrador: Yo soy
el candidato con la solución a sus problemas

A los estados unidos vinimos
a aprender cómo pronunciar mal nuestros nombres
A perder la definición de orgullo
A tener la mala suerte a favor de nosotros
A vivir en casas que de ninguna manera son hogares
por donde se pasean cucarachas y ratones
A entrenarnos para encender televisores
A soñar con trabajos que nunca nos darán
A llenar solicitudes del mantengo
A graduarnos de la escuela sin una educación
A ser conscriptos deformados y destruidos
A trabajar a tiempo completo y estar aún desempleados
A esperar devoluciones del fisco
y estar borrachos siempre y perder contacto
con el corazón y el alma de nuestra raza
y con el clima que moldea nuestro rostro

A rendirle homenaje a
la bandera
de los estados unidos
de las ventas a plazos
Una nación
en el discrimen
el cual representa
e irradia

pobreza injusticia
y pelotones de fusilamiento
televisados
para todo aquel que
tenga el sol a favor
de su piel

Lápiz: Pencil
Pluma: Pen
Cocina: Kitchen
Gallina: Hen

Todo el que aprenda esto
recibirá un diplomado de equivalencia de escuela superior
un suministro por vida de agencias de empleo
un cobrador distinto por cada día de la semana
el derecho a votar por su verdugo predilecto
y dos hamburgers en times square por treinta y cinco
centavos

Nos bajamos
del avión bimotor
en idlewild
(renombrado aeropuerto
kennedy veinte años después)
con todos nuestros muebles
y enseres personales
en los bolsillos de atrás

Seguimos el letrero
que dice bienvenidos a américa
pero no toque
la propiedad
los transgresores serán electrocutados
si no puede hablar ingles
siga el camión de basura
hasta la oficina del mantengo

De modo que esto es américa
tierra de la libertad

para todos
menos nosotros
De modo de que esto es américa
donde te levantas
por la mañana
a cepillarte los dientes
con el mantengo
De modo que esto es américa
tierra de latas de basura
democráticas
donde te puedes comprar
una caja de cornflakes kellogs
a plazos
De modo que esto es américa
tierra de la libertad
de ver las
aventuras de supermán
en la tv si conoces a
alguien que tenga una
que funcione
De modo que esto es américa
donde te mantienen
ocupado cantando
en mi casa toman bustelo
en mi casa toman bustelo
en mi casa toman bustelo

Translated by Alfredo Matilla Rivas

URAYOÁN NOEL

No Longer Ode Oda Indebida

*for my grandmother in Puerto Rico
para mi abuela en Puerto Rico*

A hurricane destroyed your sense of home
El huracán arrasa lo que amas.
and all you wanted was to pack your bags
Quieres viajar de noche, sin manera,
in dead of night, still waving mental flags,
sin maletas, izar mental bandera.
forgetting the nation is a syndrome.
Del mar llevas la espuma, panoramas
All that's left of the sea in you is foam,
de una patria inasible y sus dolamas,
the coastline's broken voice and all its crags.
voz ronca de disturbios mar afuera
You hear the governor admit some snags
inundando ciudades de salmuera.
were hit, nada, mere blips in the biome,
El gobernador vende melodramas
nothing that private equity can't fix
para saciar al buitре inversionista;
once speculators pour into San Juan
le ora a San Ciprián y Santa Clara
to harvest bad seeds of an idea.
sabiendo que la isla se vacía.
She tells you Santa Clara in '36
Dice tu abuela, y a primera vista,
had nothing on the brutal San Ciprián,
que el viento de la muerte no compara.
and yes, your abuela's named María.
Ella que también se llama María.

Thoughts of Katrina and the Superdome,
Oh, sol de Nueva Orleans, ¡cómo derramas
el Caribe mapped with blood and sandbags,
sangre colonial en cualquier acera!

displaced, diasporic, Spanglish hashtags,
Hay diques y turistas dondequiera,
a phantom tab you keep on Google Chrome,
fantasmas de un Caribe en hologramas,
days of hunger and dreams of honeycomb.

hemisféretros. Ya sin más proclamas,
Are souls reborn or worn thin like old rags?
escupamos al dios de cabecera

The locust tree still stands although it sags,
(hashtag: #queelverdugoseaelquemuera).
austere sharks sequence the island's genome,

Cotorras, ¡revoloteen las ramas
and parrots squawk survival politics
para que el bosque de voces resista!
whose only power grid is the damp dawn.

Tiburones austeros, ¡pongan cara
There's no other way, no panacea.
de que al crucero le llego el día!

Throw stuff at empire's walls and see what sticks
Se acabaron los memes de conquista,
or tear down the walls you were standing on?

Vivimos para que otro sol brillara,
Why not run that question by María?
revolución que nadie domaría.

Beyond the indigenous chromosome,
Pese a los ancestros que reclamas
your gut genealogy's in chains and gags,
tu genealogía es prisionera:
paraded though the colonies' main drags
cadenas, mordazas, lucha obrera,
and left to die. So when you write your tome,
cenizas de carbón sobre las camas.
please note: each word must be a catacomb,
El ácido vital que desparramas

must be a sepulcher and must be a
 en una extraña especie de *aporía*
cradle in some sort of *aporía*
 quema las joyas de tu fantasía.
where bodies draw on song as guns are drawn,
 Cual h silenciosa de *huracán*,
resurgent, silent h in *huracán*.
 tus muertos insurrectos gritarán
Your ache song booms ashore. Ashé, María.
 quebranto y contracanto. Ashé, María.

Essay by Urayoán Noel

WHEN APPROACHING Latino poetry, I emphasize its plurality of languages and the many differences they embody. Latino identity in the U.S. is a pan-ethnic formation often understood in terms of a project of political unity, and, as such, there is no one language for Latino poetry.¹ Since Latino identity is a hemispheric arrangement, Latino poetry reflects the linguistic and cultural diversity of the Americas, whether in English, Spanish, or other languages of Latin America and the Caribbean, including Indigenous languages and creoles.

Poems and poetry were key to the Chicano and Puerto Rican movements of the 1960s and 1970s, which made possible the rise of Latino Studies as an academic discipline in the 1980s and 1990s. Festivals like *Flor y Canto* and performance spaces like the Nuyorican Poets Café helped popularize Latino poetry as an embodied practice across vernacular language communities, where the mixing of English and Spanish was linked to the reclamation of Indigenous and Afro-diasporic traditions. Early critical work found a social politics in the languages of Latino poetry, whether by framing Chicano poetry as a mode of “interlingual” writing where discrete code-switching between English and Spanish gives way to a generative tension between two (or possibly more) languages² or by reading for Nuyorican poetry’s “tropicalization” of poetry’s Northern geographies as well as its synesthetic rendering onto the page the rhythms of Afro-Latin music.³ Much of this critical work stressed poetry as

¹ See Suzanne Oboler, *Ethnic Labels, Latino Lives: Identity and the Politics of (Re) Presentation in the United States* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), 6.

² See Bruce-Novoa, *Chicano Poetry: A Response to Chaos* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1982) and the discussion by Rafael Pérez-Torres in *Movements in Chicano Poetry: Against Myths, Against Margins* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), esp. 213. Bruce-Novoa analyzes poems by poets such as Rodolfo “Corky” Gonzales, Alurista, José Montoya, Ricardo Sánchez, and Raúl R. Salinas, all included in the *Latino Poetry* anthology.

³ See the introduction to Frances Aparicio and Susana Chávez-Silverman, ed., *Tropicalizations: Transcultural Representations of Latinidad* (Durham, NH:

a heterodox mode of resistance to linguistic assimilation, often involving the interplay of languages in formally eccentric and politically defiant ways.⁴

The work of poets such as Gloria Anzaldúa, Sandra María Esteves, Alurista, Victor Hernández Cruz, José Montoya, and Tato Laviera has helped shape the sociolinguistic and literary study of Spanglish as a creative response to the complex reality of living between languages enmeshed in unequal relationships of power,⁵ as well as the emergence of Spanglish as a powerful metaphor for the complexities of Latino life in the U.S. and its rich cultural histories and practices.⁶ In this way, Latino poetry has emerged as a laboratory of languages and identities, bringing notions of *border* and *diaspora* to the fore.⁷

Over the past fifteen years, as Latino literature has become more institutionally visible, the work of innovative Latino poets has received greater critical attention, especially given the surge of interest in translingual poetics that do not merely combine languages but also destabilize or transform them, as

University of New England Press, 1997), and Aparicio's essay "*Salsa, Maracas, and Baile: Latin Popular Music in the Poetry of Victor Hernandez Cruz*," *MELUS* 16, no. 1 (1990): 43–58, as well as the poems by Victor Hernández Cruz and Sandra María Esteves included in the *Latino Poetry* anthology.

⁴ See Alfred Arteaga, *Chicano Poetics: Heterotexts and Hybridities* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), and Juan Flores, "'Qué Assimilated, Brother, Yo Soy Asimilao': The Structuring of Puerto Rican Identity in the U.S.," *Journal of Ethnic Studies* 13, no. 3 (1985): 1–16. Arteaga discusses numerous poets included in the *Latino Poetry* anthology, among them Gaspar Pérez de Villagrà, Rodolfo "Corky" Gonzales, Alurista, José Montoya, Juan Felipe Herrera, Lucha Corpi, and Lorna Dee Cervantes. Flores builds his argument around the work of Tato Laviera.

⁵ See chapter 6 of Ana Celia Zentella, *Growing Up Bilingual: Puerto Rican Children in New York* (New York: Wiley, 1997), and, as a general reference, her "Spanglish," in *Keywords for Latina/o Studies*, ed. Deborah R. Vargas, Lawrence La Fountain-Stokes, and Nancy Raquel Mirabal (New York: NYU Press, 2017).

⁶ See Ed Morales, *Living in Spanglish: The Search for Latino Identity in America* (New York: St. Martin's, 2003). Among the poets Morales's book engages are José Martí, William Carlos Williams, Julia de Burgos, Alurista, José Montoya, Gloria Anzaldúa, Jimmy Santiago Baca, Miguel Algarín, Miguel Piñero, Pedro Pietri, Sandra María Esteves, Tato Laviera, Mariposa Fernández, Willie Perdomo, and Edwin Torres, all included in the *Latino Poetry* anthology.

⁷ See the poems by Gloria Anzaldúa and Mariposa in the *Latino Poetry* anthology.

in the poems by Edwin Torres, Rodrigo Toscano, and Steven Alvarez included in the *Latino Poetry* anthology.⁸ Some of the most important analyses of Latino poetry over the past quarter century have connected its linguistic innovation to a political imagination beyond the cultural nationalisms of the 1960s and 1970s, whether by arguing for poetic bilingualism as a challenge to the monolingual state or by reading a range of Latino poetic geographies as modes of subaltern resistance to a global neoliberal hegemony.⁹ Even so, Latino poetry remains underappreciated by literary scholars and the media alike, and many of the most visible readings of Latino poetry still assume a binary understanding of Latino identity in terms of what Ilan Stavans calls “the tension between *double attachments* to place, to language, and to identity [my emphasis].”¹⁰ In my reading, the language of Latino poetry should be understood beyond the clash between “the Anglo and the Hispanic” worlds and across a complex field of differences and intersections.¹¹

Contemporary Latino poetry is renewing language and complicating existing paradigms from a space of difference. Black and Indigenous Latino poets are writing against instrumentalized identities and from lived experiences of struggle against anti-Blackness and settler colonialism. Undocumented poets are writing against the assumption of citizenship (even if unequal citizenship) that has long shaped Latino politics in the

⁸ See Sarah Dowling, *Translingual Poetics: Writing Personhood Under Settler Colonialism* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2018), which discusses the work of Cecilia Vicuña; and Stephanie Burt, *The Poem Is You: 60 Contemporary American Poems and How to Read Them* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016), which analyzes a poem by Tato Laviera.

⁹ See Doris Sommer, *Bilingual Aesthetics: A New Sentimental Education* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), and Michael Dowdy, *Broken Souths: Latina/o Poetic Responses to Neoliberalism and Globalization* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2013). Sommer engages the work of poets such as Victor Hernández Cruz and Tato Laviera, while Dowdy devotes significant attention to poets such as Martín Espada, Juan Felipe Herrera, Maurice Kilwein Guevara, Jack Agüeros, Judith Ortiz Cofer, Marjorie Agosín, Valerie Martínez, and Victor Hernández Cruz (the title of Dowdy’s book comes from a poem by Hernández Cruz).

¹⁰ Ilan Stavans, “Preface,” in *The Norton Anthology of Latino Literature* (New York: Norton, 2010), liii.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

U.S.¹² Disabled poets are writing against the ableism of social movement histories and from a sense of aesthetic and political liberation as personal and collective bodymind practices. Trans poets are mapping the coloniality of gender and insisting on gender difference and dissidence as central to social justice movements, using and defining terms like *Latinx* and *Latine*.

In the context of the increasing Latinization of the U.S. and the demographic and political visibility of certain diasporas (Central American, South American, Dominican, etc.), Latino poetry is also challenging the orthodox geographies of Latino identity (Chicanos in the Southwest and West, Puerto Ricans in New York, Cuban Americans in South Florida, etc.). With these expanded geographies come expansive political, historical, and linguistic imaginaries. In this sense, *border* in a Latino poetry context can refer not only to the Mexico–U.S. border but also the Haiti–Dominican Republic border, while *diaspora* can be applied not only to Hispanophone Caribbean communities but also to movements across, along, and beyond the Central American isthmus and the U.S. or to histories of political persecution and exile in South America. Even within the U.S., given the gentrification of many historically Latino urban areas and the growth of Latino communities across suburban and rural areas far beyond the Mexico–U.S. border, it is impossible to reduce the linguistic innovations of today’s Latino poetry to a few emblematic locales akin to the countercultural heyday of San Francisco’s Mission or New York’s Loisaida neighborhoods. Tomorrow’s Latino poetry may be in Quechua or Garifuna or Haitian Kreyòl, and it may be exurban or rural and emerge far from the liberal coasts.

I have argued for an approach to Latino poetry beyond an English-Spanish binary and attuned to a range of historical, geographic, cultural, and embodied differences. Key to this argument is an appreciation of the many Englishes and many Spanishes across the constellation of Latino poetries past and present. In a sense, the borderlands of Latino poetry are also linguistic, extending into and beyond Latino barrios that are

¹² See G. Cristina Mora, *Making Hispanics: How Activists, Bureaucrats, and Media Constructed a New American* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014) for some useful context.

home to historically racialized and classed varieties of English and Spanish. We can acknowledge the historical and ongoing othering of Spanish in the U.S. as a subaltern language (fueled by nativism, xenophobia, anti-immigrant sentiment, etc.) while also stressing that Spanish as a language of colonization predates the United States. Following the translation scholar Lawrence Venuti's famous distinction between a foreignizing translation that performs difference and a domesticating translation that assimilates difference, we could argue that, within Latino poetry as a non-monolingual field, much of the most linguistically exciting and influential work has stressed the performance of difference.¹³

A final question has to do with how to square such a high literary genealogy of Latino poetry with its undeniable indebtedness to the oral tradition, including border and diasporic forms such as corridos and *plenas* as well as the vernacular reinvention of traditional Spanish forms such as *coplas* and *décimas*. My own sense is that the linguistic innovations of Latino poetry should be understood from above and from below, at the intersections of print and expressive cultures, where literary innovation is inseparable from the embodiment of poetic language as a mode of creative survival and resistance.

Many of the tensions I have discussed so far animate the four poems I was asked to consider for this essay. Francisco X. Alarcón's "Un Beso Is Not a Kiss" models a poetics of queer untranslatability where the open-ended nature of the poem is an invitation for the reader to complete its meaning. For Alarcón, a poem is thus collaborative, much like the act of kissing, and just as "un beso can't / be captured," a poem resists fixed meanings and cannot be "traded" for another poem, and a hunger for new meanings can never be "sated." "Un beso" is not "a kiss" because "un beso" evokes certain things (a sense of mystery or danger) that the English "a kiss" cannot convey (except, perhaps, a shared secret, which is the promise of the poem). In this sense, Alarcón's poem embodies Venuti's foreignizing approach to translating, asking us to linger with rather than assimilate the differences that make "un beso"

¹³ Lawrence Venuti, *The Translator's Invisibility: A History of Translation*, 2nd ed. (Abingdon: Routledge, 2012).

impossible to domesticate into “a kiss.” With three stanzas of seven short lines each, Alarcón’s poem is deceptively simple, its seeming regularity complicated by how bilingual lines are broken in surprising ways, asking us to embrace multiple and possibly contradictory meanings (“un beso can’t” and “un beso is”). Given all this, the poem’s last word (*fatal*) is significant since it can be read in both English and Spanish yet has different meanings and shades of meaning (in Spanish, *fatal* can mean “unavoidable” as well as “deadly”).

Alarcón’s use of Nahuatl in “In Xochitl In Cuicatl” challenges an English-Spanish binary, reflecting his own Nahua heritage and upbringing while embodying the vernacular Flor y Canto politics of the Chicano Movement, with which Alarcón was involved. (“In Xochitl In Cuicatl” is Nahuatl for “Flor y Canto,” or “Flower and Song” in English.) The use of different columns for the English and Spanish suggests the poem is a bilingual self-translation, but the Nahuatl title and its repetition in the body of the poem signal that perhaps neither English nor Spanish is the original language and that neither European language can take precedence over Nahuatl. As in the previous poem, the symmetry of lines (their length and number per stanza) belies how the poem at times rejects a line-by-line equivalence: in stanza four “un olvido / encontrado” becomes “a memory / at once lost / and found,” sacrificing the off-rhyming four-syllable lines of the Spanish yet spreading its music out over three lines and changing the focus from forgetting (“olvido”) to memory. Not only does Alarcón’s English sound better than a more conventional translation (something like “a found / forgetting” or “an oblivion / found”), but it also interrupts the poem as a system of bilingual equivalences, as does the use of Nahuatl. The poem’s title also embodies a distinct vision of poetry as collective song and communal world-making rooted in the natural world, far removed from the lyric “I” of the European tradition, as evident in the last stanza’s invocation of a collective (“we”) personified as fireflies who come together at night in “dreaming up / the cosmos.”

Pedro Pietri’s “The Broken English Dream” embodies an irreverently translingual performance where the assimilation of a Puerto Rican underclass into midcentury New York City is criticized by way of a parody of the Pledge of Allegiance.

The poem's surrealist imagery and lack of punctuation give it a breathless feel, somewhere between denunciation and comedy monologue. Spanish in the poem scores the violence of assimilation, echoing a children's song that uses rhymes ("Pluma: Pen" and "Gallina: Hen") to teach Puerto Ricans English in school, and ending with a famous jingle used in Bustelo coffee commercials. "The Broken English Dream" appeared in Pietri's first book, *Puerto Rican Obituary*, which was published by the Marxist Monthly Review Press in 1973. The poem subverts the stereotypical depiction of Nuyoricans as poor colonial subjects of the welfare state (as in *West Side Story*), developing a scathing critique of how Spanish is commodified and used to assimilate Nuyoricans into an exploitative system. Pietri also performed the poem on his 1971 live album *¡Aquí Se Habla Español!*, recorded at the Puerto Rican Socialist Party's Casa Puerto Rico (off Manhattan's Union Square), and his irreverent performances would help shape the Nuyoric poetry tradition.

At the end of the poem, the anaphoric repetition of "So this is America" evokes Allen Ginsberg's classic Beat poem "America" while connecting the U.S. as a land where one is free to consume and be sold mindless popular culture to a colonized "america / exploited by columbus / in fourteen ninety-two." In Pietri's insightful, satirical vision, one vast, extractivist colonial project links the conquest of the Caribbean and the Americas and the diasporic displacement of Puerto Ricans like himself to New York, where they are expected to work nonstop to line the empire's pockets and where you "follow the garbage truck / to the welfare department / if you cannot speak English."

My own poem "No Longer Ode / Oda Indebida" is a self-translation in conversation with the poets discussed above. (It appears in my 2021 collection *Transversal*, which includes a self-translation after Alarcón and an elegy for Pietri, whom I consider a mentor.) The original English poem grew out of my sense of powerlessness as Hurricane María ravaged my native Puerto Rico in 2017. Looking for a form that could serve as a vessel, I played around with the three-part structure of the Pindaric ode of ancient Greece using Petrarchan sonnets (abbaab-bacdecde), but it felt too stiff and formal, so I decided to make the last stanza a *décima* (abbaaccddc)—a ten-line stanza prevalent in Hispanic verse—only in pentameter instead of the

usual octosyllabic lines. The *décima* is commonly improvised in Puerto Rican *música jíbara*, and is characterized by a more compressed, playful music, which I felt the poem needed. It is also a form that reminded me of my grandmother, to whom the poem is dedicated. Once I had played around with the form enough, the poem came to me in bursts and torrents, and I began piecing it together.

When I was editing *Transversal* in 2020, I decided I needed a Spanish version as well, since so much of the manuscript consisted of self-translations and I knew I wanted it to open the book. I tried to honor the syllabic music of Spanish by making the Spanish version hendecasyllabic (eleven syllables, almost but not quite matching the ten syllables of a regular iambic pentameter line). My choice to alternate lines in English and Spanish was partly a response to being stuck in New York during lockdown: Puerto Rico and the Caribbean felt so far away that folding together the Spanish and English versions was a way of feeling closer, of insisting on the connectedness of languages and geographies and making the page an archipelago amid diaspora. In my process, there was a nod to the queer intimacy of Alarcón's and Roque Raquel Salas Rivera's differently embodied self-translations as well as to Rhina P. Espallat's virtuosic self-translations of rhymed and metered verse. There is also something of Pietri here: his mix of irony and heartbreak, his jarring music, and his willingness to make language mean by confronting us with its unmeaning, especially at the end of the poem when the Yoruba word *Ashé* (used colloquially to mean something like "Amen") carries with it the ghosts of other words (*ache*, *ashore*, the *hache* or letter *h* in Spanish), the ghosts of all that is untranslatable.¹⁴

¹⁴ See Emily Apter, *Against World Literature: On the Politics of Untranslatability* (London: Verso, 2013).

Un ensayo de Urayoán Noel

MI ACERCAMIENTO A LA POESÍA latina enfatiza su pluralidad de lenguas y las diferencias entre ellas. La identidad latina en los Estados Unidos es una formación pan-étnica que a menudo se ha entendido como parte de un proyecto de unidad política, por lo cual no hay una sola lengua para la poesía latina.¹ Ya que la identidad latina es una formación hemisférica, la poesía latina refleja la diversidad lingüística y cultural de las Américas, sea en inglés, español o otras lenguas de Latinoamérica y el Caribe, incluidas las lenguas originarias y los creoles.

Los poemas y la poesía fueron cruciales para el Movimiento Chicano y el Movimiento Puertorriqueño de los 1960 y 1970, los cuales posibilitaron el surgimiento de los estudios latinos como disciplina académica en los 1980 y 1990. Festivales como Flor y Canto y espacios de performance como el Nuyorican Poets Café ayudaron a popularizar la poesía latina como práctica corporal de lenguas vernáculos comunitarias, donde la mezcla del inglés y el español se conectaba con la reclamación de tradiciones indígenas y afro-diaspóricas. La crítica temprana recalcó un aspecto político en los lenguajes de la poesía latina, abordando a la poesía chicana como una modalidad de escritura “interlingüe” más allá del cambio de códigos entre el inglés y el español y caracterizada por una tensión productiva entre dos (o más) lenguas,² o bien leyendo a la poesía nuyorican como una “tropicalización” de las geografías del Norte y resaltando el carácter sinestésico de sus transcripciones de los ritmos de la música afrolatina.³

¹ Véase Suzanne Oboler, *Ethnic Labels, Latino Lives: Identity and the Politics of (Re) Presentation in the United States* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), 6.

² Véase Bruce-Novoa, *Chicano Poetry: A Response to Chaos* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1982) y la discusión de Rafael Pérez-Torres en su *Movements in Chicano Poetry: Against Myths, Against Margins* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), en especial la página 213. Bruce-Novoa analiza poemas de poetas como Rodolfo “Corky” Gonzales, Alurista, José Montoya, Ricardo Sánchez y Raúl R. Salinas, todos incluidos en la antología de *Poesía latina*.

³ Véase la introducción de Frances Aparicio y Susana Chávez-Silverman, ed., *Tropicalizations: Transcultural Representations of Latinidad* (Durham, NH:

Mucha de esta obra crítica recalcó la función de la poesía como modo heterodoxo de resistencia a la asimilación lingüística, valorando la mezcla de lenguas como práctica excéntrica y como desafío político.⁴

La obra de poetas como Gloria Anzaldúa, Sandra María Esteves, Alurista, Victor Hernández Cruz, José Montoya y Tato Laviera ha ayudado a definir el estudio sociolingüístico y literario del spanglish como respuesta creativa a las complejidades de vivir entre lenguas marcadas por relaciones desiguales de poder,⁵ y a fijar el spanglish como una poderosa metáfora de las complejidades de la vida Latina en los Estados Unidos y de sus historias y prácticas culturales.⁶ La poesía latina también ha ayudado a consolidar los términos *frontera* y *diáspora* como palabras clave, reflejando el poder que ha tenido y sigue teniendo como laboratorio de lenguajes e identidades.⁷

En los últimos 15 años la literatura latina se ha vuelto más visible en los espacios institucionales, mientras que las innovaciones lingüísticas de la poesía latina han recibido más atención

University of New England Press, 1997), así como el ensayo de Aparicio “*Salsa, Maracas, and Baile: Latin Popular Music in the Poetry of Victor Hernandez Cruz*,” *MELUS* 16, no. 1, (1990): 43–58 y los poemas de Victor Hernández Cruz y Sandra María Esteves incluidos en la antología de *Poesía latina*.

⁴ Véase Alfred Arteaga, *Chicano Poetics: Heterotexts and Hybridities* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), y Juan Flores, “‘Qué Assimilated, Brother, Yo Soy Asimilao’: The Structuring of Puerto Rican Identity in the U.S.,” *Journal of Ethnic Studies* 13, no. 3 (1985): 1–16. Arteaga discute la obra de una variedad de poetas incluidos en la antología de *Poesía latina*, entre los cuales figuran Gaspar Pérez de Villagrà, Rodolfo “Corky” Gonzales, Alurista, José Montoya, Juan Felipe Herrera, Lucha Corpi y Lorna Dee Cervantes. Flores enfoca su argumento en la obra de Tato Laviera.

⁵ Véase el capítulo 6 de Ana Celia Zentella, *Growing Up Bilingual: Puerto Rican Children in New York* (Nueva York: Wiley, 1997), y como referencia general su “Spanglish” en *Keywords for Latina/o Studies*, ed. Deborah R. Vargas, Lawrence La Fountain-Stokes y Nancy Raquel Mirabal (Nueva York: NYU Press, 2017).

⁶ Véase Ed Morales, *Living in Spanglish: The Search for Latino Identity in America* (Nueva York: St. Martin’s, 2003). En el libro de Morales figuran poetas como José Martí, William Carlos Williams, Julia de Burgos, Alurista, José Montoya, Gloria Anzaldúa, Jimmy Santiago Baca, Miguel Algarín, Miguel Piñero, Pedro Pietri, Sandra María Esteves, Tato Laviera, Mariposa Fernández, Willie Perdomo y Edwin Torres, todos incluidos en la antología de *Poesía latina*.

⁷ Véanse los poemas de Gloria Anzaldúa y Mariposa Fernández incluidos en la antología de *Poesía latina*.

crítica, especialmente dado el creciente interés por las poéticas translingüísticas que no sólo combinan lenguas sino que las desestabilizan y transforman, como en el caso de los poemas de Edwin Torres, Rodrigo Toscano y Steven Alvarez incluidos en la *Antología de poesía latina*.⁸ En lo que va del siglo, algunos de los estudios más importantes de la poesía latina han conectado las innovaciones lingüísticas de esta poesía a una imaginación política más allá de los nacionalismos culturales de los 1960 y 1970, viendo el bilingüismo poético como un reto al estado monolingüe o bien leyendo una diversidad de geografías poéticas latinas como modos subalternos de resistencia contra la hegemonía global del neoliberalismo.⁹ No obstante, la poesía latina sigue siendo minusvalorada por la crítica y por los medios, y muchas de las lecturas más visibles de la poesía latina aún presuponen una noción binaria de la identidad latina en términos de lo que Ilan Stavans caracteriza como la tensión que resulta cuando hay dobles vínculos en cuanto al lugar, la lengua y la identidad.¹⁰ Mi lectura busca entender la poesía latina más allá del choque entre el mundo “anglo” y el mundo “hispano” y valorar una compleja gama de diferencias e intersecciones.¹¹

La poesía latina contemporánea está renovando el lenguaje y complicando los paradigmas existentes desde la diferencia. Más allá de las identidades instrumentalizadas, las poéticas negras e indígenas poetizan desde la experiencia de luchar

⁸ Véase Sarah Dowling, *Translingual Poetics: Writing Personhood Under Settler Colonialism* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2018), donde se discute la obra de Cecilia Vicuña, y Stephanie Burt, *The Poem Is You: 60 Contemporary American Poems and How to Read Them* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016), donde se analiza un poema de Tato Laviera.

⁹ Véase Doris Sommer, *Bilingual Aesthetics: A New Sentimental Education* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), y Michael Dowdy, *Broken Souths: Latina/o Poetics Responses to Neoliberalism and Globalization* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2013). Sommer discute la obra de poetas como Victor Hernández Cruz y Tato Laviera mientras que Dowdy le dedica atención detenida a la obra de poetas como Martín Espada, Juan Felipe Herrera, Mauricio Kilwein Guevara, Jack Agüeros, Judith Ortiz Cofer, Marjorie Agosín, Valerie Martínez y Victor Hernández Cruz (el título del libro de Dowdy viene de un poema de Hernández Cruz).

¹⁰ Ilan Stavans, “Preface,” en *The Norton Anthology of Latino Literature* (Nueva York: Norton, 2010), liii.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

contra el racismo y el colonialismo de poblamiento. Los poetas indocumentados complican la presunción de ciudadanía (si bien una ciudadanía desigual) que ha caracterizado a los movimientos sociales latinos en Estados Unidos.¹² Las poéticas de la discapacidad se posicionan contra la discriminación de los movimientos sociales históricos y abordan la liberación estética y política como prácticas personales y colectivas situadas en las diferencias del cuerpo y la mente. Las poéticas trans interrogan las lógicas coloniales del género y afirman la centralidad de la diferencia y disidencia de género dentro de los movimientos de justicia social, empleando y definiendo términos como *Latinx* y *Latine*.

Ante la creciente latinización de los Estados Unidos y la visibilidad demográfica y política de ciertas diásporas (centroamericanas, suramericanas, dominicana, etc.), la poesía latina desafía las geografías ortodoxas de la identidad latina (chicanos en el suroeste y oeste, puertorriqueños en Nueva York, cubanos en el sur de la Florida, etc.). Con estas geografías expandidas viene la expansión de los imaginarios políticos, históricos y lingüísticos, así como nuevos retos epistemológicos para el campo de las poéticas latinas vistas desde una perspectiva hemisférica y global. Según esta lógica, *frontera* en el contexto de la poesía latina puede referirse no sólo a la frontera entre México y Estados Unidos sino también a la frontera dominico-haitiana, mientras que *diáspora* se puede aplicar no sólo a comunidades del Caribe hispanoparlante sino también a los movimientos a lo largo y más allá del istmo centroamericano o a historias de persecución política y exilio en Suramérica. Aun dentro de los Estados Unidos, tomando en cuenta la gentrificación de muchas áreas urbanas históricamente latinas y el crecimiento de las comunidades latinas en áreas suburbanas y rurales lejos de la frontera entre México y Estados Unidos, es imposible reducir las innovaciones lingüísticas de los poetas latinos de hoy a una serie de localidades emblemáticas, como lo fueron en su tiempo vecindarios como La Misión en San Francisco y Loisaida en Nueva York. Quizás en el futuro la poesía latina

¹² Véase el contexto que provee G. Cristina Mora en *Making Hispanics: How Activists, Bureaucrats, and Media Constructed a New American* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014).

paradigmática sea en quechua, garífuna o kreyòl haitiano y venga de áreas rurales o suburbanas lejos de las costas liberales de los Estados Unidos.

He abogado por un acercamiento a la poesía latina más allá del binario inglés-español y que tome en cuenta una serie de diferencias históricas, geográficas, culturales e identitarias. Este argumento depende de la apreciación de las distintas variedades del inglés y del español dentro de la constelación de poéticas latinas históricas y actuales. En cierto sentido, las fronteras de la poesía latina son también lingüísticas y se extienden más allá de los barrios latinos donde han surgido variedades del inglés y del español que llevan consigo estigmas de raza y de clase. Podemos reconocer la marginalización histórica y actual del español en los Estados Unidos (por razones de nativismo, xenofobia, sentimiento anti-inmigrante, etc.) y a la vez recalcar que el español como lengua de la colonización precede a los Estados Unidos, de forma que se hace difícil abordar el español como lengua “extranjera.” Siguiendo la famosa distinción del estudioso de la traducción Lawrence Venuti entre una traducción extranjerizante que marca la diferencia y una traducción que domestica o asimila la diferencia, podemos argumentar que dentro de la poesía latina como campo no monolingüe mucho del trabajo más influyente y de mayor interés lingüístico es el que marca su propia diferencia.¹³

Una última pregunta sería cómo encajar una genealogía híper-literaria de la poesía latina con la innegable deuda que tiene la misma con la tradición oral, incluyendo las formas fronterizas y diaspóricas como el corrido y la plena, así como la reinención vernácula de formas españolas tradicionales como la copla y la décima. Mi sentir es que las innovaciones lingüísticas de la poesía latina deben entenderse desde arriba y desde abajo, en la intersección de la cultura impresa y las culturas expresivas, donde la innovación literaria no se puede separar del cuerpo y del lenguaje poético como estrategia de supervivencia y resistencia.

Muchas de las tensiones que he estado discutiendo animan los poemas que considero en este ensayo. “Un Beso Is Not a

¹³ Lawrence Venuti, *The Translator's Invisibility: A History of Translation*, segunda edición (Abingdon: Routledge, 2012).

Kiss” de Francisco X. Alarcón propone una poética de lo queer como intraducible y donde el significado abierto del poema es una invitación para que el lector complete su significado. Para Alarcón, un poema es entonces un evento colaborativo, como lo es besarse, y así como “un beso can’t / be captured” (“un beso no / se puede capturar”) un poema resiste los significados fijos, no puede ser intercambiado por otro poema y su hambre de nuevos significados nunca puede ser saciada. *Un beso* no equivale a *a kiss* porque “un beso” evoca ciertas cosas (un sentido de misterio o peligro) que “a kiss” en inglés no puede comunicar (excepto, quizás, como un secreto compartido, que es la promesa del poema). En este sentido, el poema de Alarcón ejemplifica el acercamiento extranjerizante hacia la traducción que describe Venuti y nos invita a quedarnos con las diferencias que hacen que “un beso” no se pueda domesticar y asimilar como “a kiss.” Con sus tres estrofas de siete versos cortos cada una, el poema de Alarcón parece sencillo a primera vista, pero el sorpresivo encabalgamiento de sus versos bilingües rompe con la regularidad del poema y nos pide que aceptemos lecturas múltiples e incluso contradictorias (“un beso can’t” y “un beso is”). Ante todo esto, la última palabra del poema (*fatal*) es significativa ya que puede leerse en inglés y en español pero tiene distintos significados y matices en ambas lenguas (por ejemplo, en español, *fatal* también tiene la acepción de “inevitable,” la cual carece en inglés).

En el poema de Alarcón “In Xochitl In Cuicatl” el uso del náhuatl desestabiliza el binario inglés-español y refleja la herencia y crianza nahua del poeta; además, ilustra la visión política vernácula del Flor y Canto y del movimiento chicano, en el cual Alarcón participó. (La expresión náhuatl “In Xochitl In Cuicatl” quiere decir “Flor y Canto.”) El uso de diferentes columnas para el inglés y el español nos sugiere que el poema es una auto-traducción bilingüe pero el título náhuatl y la repetición de éste en el cuerpo del poema señalan que tal vez ni el inglés ni el español sean la lengua original y que ninguna de las dos tiene precedencia sobre el náhuatl. Así como en el poema anterior, la simetría de los versos (su extensión y número por estrofa) oculta como el poema rechaza una equivalencia verso por verso: en la cuarta estrofa “un olvido / encontrado” se convierte en “a memory / at once lost / and found” de forma que, aunque



se sacrifican los versos tetrasílabos del español, la musicalidad se despliega en tres versos y el enfoque ya no es en el olvido sino en la memoria. No es sólo que el inglés de Alarcón suena mejor que una traducción más convencional (algo como “a found / forgetting” or “an oblivion / found”) sino que se interrumpe la lógica del poema como sistema de equivalencias bilingües, así como pasa con el uso del náhuatl. El título del poema también representa una visión particular de la poesía como canto colectivo y como práctica de cosmovisión comunal alejada del “yo” lírico de la tradición europea, como vemos en la última estrofa con la invocación de un nosotros (“todos juntos”) personificado como luciérnagas que se congregan de noche para ir “soñando / el cosmos.”

“The Broken English Dream” (“Sueño en inglés goleta”) de Pedro Pietri se trata de una irreverente performance translingüística donde la asimilación de una clase marginada de puertorriqueños en el Nueva York de mediados del siglo pasado se critica mediante una parodia del *Pledge of Allegiance* que recitan los niños en la escuela en los Estados Unidos. Las imágenes surrealistas y la falta de puntuación le dan al poema un aspecto febril, entre denuncia y monólogo cómico. En el poema, el español musicaliza la violencia de la asimilación, tarareándonos una canción rimada (“Pluma: Pen” y “Gallina: Hen”) con la cual se les enseña a los puertorriqueños en la escuela y que termina con una publicidad para vender café Bustelo. “The Broken English Dream” fue incluido en el primer poemario de Pietri, *Puerto Rican Obituary*, publicado en 1973 por la editorial marxista Monthly Review Press, y el poema de Pietri subvierte la representación estereotípica de la comunidad puertorriqueña de Nueva York como pobres sujetos coloniales del estado benefactor (como en *West Side Story*) y desarrolla una mordaz crítica de cómo el español se usa para vender productos y para asimilar a la diáspora puertorriqueña dentro de un sistema de explotación. Pietri también recitó el poema en su disco en vivo de 1971 *¡Aquí Se Habla Español!*, grabado en la Casa Puerto Rico del Partido Socialista Puertorriqueño (cerca de Union Square en Manhattan), y sus irreverentes performances ayudarían a forjar la tradición poética nuyorican.

Al final del poema, la repetición anafórica de “So this is America” evoca al clásico poema “America” de Allen Ginsberg



y crea un paralelo entre los Estados Unidos de su tiempo—una tierra donde si se tiene libertad es para comprar y consumir las frivolidades de la cultura popular—y toda una América colonizada: “america / exploited by columbus / in fourteen ninety-two.” (“america / explotada por colón / en mil cuatrocientos noventa y dos”). Según la perspicaz visión satírica de Pietri, un gran proyecto colonial extractivista conecta la conquista del Caribe y las Américas con el desplazamiento diaspórico de puertorriqueños como él a Nueva York, donde trabajarán día y noche para llenar los bolsillos del imperio y donde quien no habla inglés es la basura del estado benefactor: “follow the garbage truck / to the welfare department / if you cannot speak English” (si no puede hablar ingles / siga el camión de basura / hasta la oficina del mantengo”).

Mi propio poema “No Longer Ode / Oda Indebida” es una auto-traducción que dialoga con los poetas antes mencionados. (Aparece en mi poemario del 2021 *Transversal*, el cual incluye una auto-traducción inspirada en Alarcón y una elegía para Pietri, a quien considero un mentor.) El texto inglés original surgió de mi sentimiento de impotencia al ver al huracán María arrasar a mi Puerto Rico natal en el 2017. Buscando una forma que me sirviera de medio, empecé a experimentar con la estructura tripartita de la oda pindárica y el soneto petrarquista (rima: abba / abba / cde / cde) pero me resultaba muy rígido y formal, así que decidí que la última estrofa debería ser una décima (rima: abbaaccddc), sólo que en pentámetro en vez del verso octosílabo típico de la décima. La décima se improvisa comúnmente como parte de la música jíbara en Puerto Rico y tiene una musicalidad más comprimida y lúdica, lo cual le hacía falta al poema. Es además una forma que me recordaba a mi abuela, a quien le dedico el poema. Después de jugar bastante con la forma, el poema me vino en ráfagas y torrentes y empecé a armar el rompecabezas.

Cuando estaba editando *Transversal* en el 2020, decidí que necesitaba una versión en español ya que una gran parte del manuscrito estaba compuesto de auto-traducciones y quería poner el poema al comienzo del libro. Traté de honrar la música silábica del español mediante el uso del endecasílabo (11 sílabas, casi pero no exactamente las 10 sílabas de un verso regular en pentámetro). Elegí alternar versos en inglés y español en

parte por cómo me sentía en Nueva York durante la cuarentena: Puerto Rico y el Caribe se sentían muy lejanos y alternar las dos lenguas era una manera de acercarme más, de insistir en la interrelación de lenguas y geografías para que la página se volviera un archipiélago aun en la diáspora. En mi proceso había un guiño de complicidad con la intimidad queer de las auto-traducciones de Alarcón y Salas Rivera y sus respectivas corporalidades, así como al virtuosismo de Rhina Espaillat en sus auto-traducciones rimadas y de gran elegancia métrica. También hay algo de Pietri aquí: su mezcla de ironía y descon-suelo, su musicalidad estremecedora y su voluntad de hacer que el lenguaje nos signifique al hacernos confrontar con su sinsentido, especialmente al final del poema cuando la palabra yoruba *ashé* (que se usa coloquialmente para querer decir algo así como “amén”) arrastra consigo los fantasmas de otras palabras (*ache*, *ashore*, la letra *hache*), los fantasmas de todo lo intraducible.¹⁴

¹⁴ Véase Emily Apter, *Against World Literature: On the Politics of Untranslatability* (London: Verso, 2013).

Discussion Questions

1. How does each poem engage with different languages—either through direct translation or hybrid forms? How does the poem’s engagement with bilingualism or multilingualism inform its shape, sound, and content? How does Francisco X. Alarcón’s “In Xochitl In Cuicatl” contrast with Urayoán Noel’s “No Longer Ode / Oda Indebida” in its presentation of two or multiple languages? What is the effect of experiencing two languages side by side versus in an alternating sequence?
2. Take some time to read the poems out loud to each other. If there are speakers of each of the languages represented, consider assigning different parts. What is it like to hear the different languages out loud? How does reading and receiving the poem in different languages affect our experience of its meanings and sounds? How does the presence of Nahuatl inform our reading of “In Xochitl In Cuicatl,” for example? What does it feel like to only understand part of a poem? How might it draw our attention more closely to sound? How can one “read” or hear a poem in a language whose literal sense one doesn’t understand?
3. What place does Spanglish hold in these poems? How does weaving one language into the other affect our understanding of the poems’ message? Are there things that can only be said in one language?
4. What does “The Broken English Dream” tell us about how language is wielded to oppress and marginalize certain communities? How does the language “borrowed” from different sources—daily speech, songs, stories, or advertisement jingles—enhance our experience of this critique?
5. What other kinds of linguistic experimentation exist in these and other poems beyond their engagement with multiple languages?

Preguntas de discusión

1. ¿De qué manera se hacen presentes múltiples idiomas en cada poema—así se trate de una traducción directa o de formas híbridas? ¿Cómo afecta el bilingüismo o el multilingüismo la forma, el sonido, y el contenido de cada poema? ¿De que manera se diferencia “In Xochitl in Cuicatl” de Francisco X. Alarcón de “Oda Indebida / No Longar Ode” de Urayoán Noel en su manera de presentar más de un idioma? ¿Como cambia nuestra percepción del poema al leer dos idiomas de lado a lado o en secuencia alterna?
2. Lean los poemas en voz alta. Si hay hablantes de cada uno de los idiomas representados, considere asignar las partes de acuerdo a dicha destreza. Describan la sensación que produce el sonido de las diferentes lenguas en los poemas cuando son leídos en voz alta. ¿Cómo afecta la lectura y recepción del poema en diferentes idiomas nuestra experiencia de sus significados y sonidos? ¿Cómo influye la presencia del náhuatl en nuestra lectura de “In Xóchitl In Cuicatl”, por ejemplo? ¿Qué se siente si sólo entendemos una parte de un poema? ¿Acaso este hecho nos hace percibir más agudamente el sonido del poema? ¿Cómo se puede “leer” y oír un poema en un idioma cuyo sentido literal no comprendemos?
3. ¿Qué lugar ocupa el “Spanglish” en estos poemas? ¿Al entrelazar un idioma con el otro, como cambia nuestra comprensión del mensaje del poema? ¿Hay cosas que sólo se pueden decir en un idioma?
4. ¿Qué nos dice “Sueño en inglés goleta” respecto al potencial del lenguaje para oprimir y marginar a ciertas comunidades? ¿De qué manera el lenguaje proveniente de registros varios (el habla cotidiana, las canciones, o los jingles publicitarios) agudiza el sentido crítico que propone el poema?

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5. ¿Qué otros tipos de experimentación lingüística existen en estos y otros poemas más allá de su interacción con múltiples idiomas?

*Poems for further reading / Poemas para lectura
adicional*

Tato Laviera, "Mixturao"

Ricardo Sánchez, "canto"

Silvia Curbelo, "Between Language and Desire"

Edwin Torres, "[no yoyo]"

José Montoya, "El Louie"

Ernesto Cardenal, "Managua 6:30 pm"

Rhina P. Espaillat, "On the Impossibility of Translation"

Rodrigo Toscano, "Latinx Poet"

Alurista, "silver"; "with"

FAMILY AND COMMUNITY

EDUARDO C. CORRAL

In Colorado My Father Scoured and Stacked Dishes

in a Tex-Mex restaurant. His co-workers,
unable to utter his name, renamed him Jalapeño.

If I ask for a goldfish, he spits a glob of phlegm
into a jar of water. The silver letters

on his black belt spell *Sangrón*. Once, borracho,
at dinner, he said: Jesus wasn't a snowman.

Arriba Durango. Arriba Orizaba. Packed
into a car trunk, he was smuggled into the States.

Frijolero. Greaser. In Tucson he branded
cattle. He slept in a stable. The horse blankets

oddly fragrant: wood smoke, lilac. He's an illegal.
I'm an Illegal-American. Once, in a grove

of saguaro, at dusk, I slept next to him. I woke
with his thumb in my mouth. ¿No qué no

tronabas pistolita? He learned English
by listening to the radio. The first four words

he memorized: In God We Trust. The fifth:
Percolate. Again and again I borrow his clothes.

He calls me Scarecrow. In Oregon he picked apples.
Braeburn. Jonagold. Cameo. Nightly,

to entertain his cuates, around a campfire,
he strummed a guitarra, sang corridos. Arriba

Durango. Arriba Orizaba. Packed into
a car trunk, he was smuggled into the States.

Greaser. Beaner. Once, borracho, at breakfast,
he said: The heart can only be broken

once, like a window. ¡No mames! His favorite
belt buckle: an águila perched on a nopal.

If he laughs out loud, his hands tremble.
Bugs Bunny wants to deport him. César Chávez

wants to deport him. When I walk through
the desert, I wear his shirt. The gaze of the moon

stitches the buttons of his shirt to my skin.
The snake hisses. The snake is torn.

LAURIE ANN GUERRERO

Put Attention

Put attention, grandma would say, as if attention
were a packet of salt to be sprinkled, or a mound
we could scoop out of a carton like ice cream.

Put attention, put attention. Put it where? In her hands?
In the percolator? On top of the television set
that seeps fat red lips and Mexican moustaches?

Next to the jade Buddha? Between La Virgen and Cousin
Pablo's sixth-grade class photo—marshmallowy teeth
jumping out of his mouth? We never corrected her.

Like the breast, Spanish lulled grandma's tongue, as we threw
down shards of English, laughing, for her to leap in and
around.

Put attention, put attention. Put it where?

Shall I put attention in my glass and drink it soft like
Montepulciano
d'Abruzzo? Like Shiner Bock? Horchata? *Put attention.*
Ponga atención, she tried to say in our language.

Put attention somewhere large. Back into her eyes.
In the part of her brain that doesn't remember her own
daughters, how to make rice, translate instructions.

ALBERTO RÍOS

Nani

Sitting at her table, she serves
the sopa de arroz to me
instinctively, and I watch her,
the absolute *mamá*, and eat words
I might have had to say more
out of embarrassment. To speak,
now-foreign words I used to speak,
too, dribble down her mouth as she serves
me albondigas. No more
than a third are easy to me.
By the stove she does something with words
and looks at me only with her
back. I am full. I tell her
I taste the mint, and watch her speak
smiles at the stove. All my words
make her smile. Nani never serves
herself, she only watches me
with her skin, her hair. I ask for more.

I watch the *mamá* warming more
tortillas for me. I watch her
fingers in the flame for me.
Near her mouth, I see a wrinkle speak
of a man whose body serves
the ants like she serves me, then more words
from more wrinkles about children, words
about this and that, flowing more
easily from these other mouths. Each serves
as a tremendous string around her,
holding her together. They speak
nani was this and that to me
and I wonder just how much of me
will die with her, what were the words
I could have been, or was. Her insides speak

through a hundred wrinkles, now, more
than she can bear, steel around her,
shouting, then, What is this thing she serves?

She asks me if I want more.
I own no words to stop her.
Even before I speak, she serves.

Essay by Lauro Flores

POETRY OFTEN addresses the bonds of family and community, and Latino poetry is no exception. But families, of course, can be a web of fraught relationships, and sometimes wider community expectations can seem constricting or parochial. The immigrant experience, which often involves displacement, adaptation, and change, makes matters even more complex—perhaps especially so when migration marks one generation but not (directly) their children.

Eduardo Corral's "In Colorado My Father Scoured and Stacked Dishes," Laurie Ann Guerrero's "Put Attention," and Alberto Ríos's "Nani" explore the nuances of these themes with poignancy, illuminating the challenges involved in navigating family bonds and forging connections within various communities.

In these poems, we encounter attempts to salvage, through memory, the images not only of individual family members but also of spaces, objects, household items, and other elements once present, now transformed. Taking such memories as a point of departure, the poets offer lyrical reconstructions of cultural bonds made tenuous by the passing of time and the pressures of assimilation.

Corral's poem paints a raw portrait of an undocumented Mexican immigrant striving to survive in the United States, and his son's complex, at times bittersweet relationship with him. The poem's fragmented structure mirrors the precarious nature of their existence. It might also point to how the past so often disrupts the present—a process reflected in the alternation of verb tenses throughout the poem.

The father, nicknamed "Jalapeño" by his coworkers, endures, like many undocumented workers, menial low-paying jobs, persecution, and racism. At the same time, he is portrayed as a defiant and enigmatic figure who wavers between moments of masculine bravado and unexpected wisdom and candor. In Corral's telling, a portrait, at once larger than life and deeply intimate in its specificity, emerges through a collage

of seemingly disconnected memories and asynchronous cultural references.

While suffering indignities, the speaker's father displays unwavering pride in his roots: "Arriba Durango. Arriba Orizaba." "His favorite / belt buckle [is] an águila perched on a nopal"—central elements of Mexico's flag and coat of arms and of the foundational myth of the Aztecs. His pride can also veer into irreverence—"The silver letters / on his black belt spell *Sangrón* [haughty, annoying]"; "If I ask for a goldfish, he spits a glob of phlegm / into a jar of water." He drinks at breakfast, and he laughs so hard his hands shake. At the same time, he is prone to moments of disarming, plainspoken insight: "The heart can only be broken // once, like a window." Perhaps a covert romantic, he sings corridos for his friends at night.

And although this combination of sentimentality and bravado is characteristic of a kind of machismo, so prevalent in the genre of the corrido, the father is also an outsider: "Bugs Bunny wants to deport him César Chávez wants / to deport him." Like the earlier "Jesus wasn't a snowman," this line, absurd at face value, seems to suggest a hidden truth. It might gesture to how the father, though feeling excluded by America as figured here via its popular culture, is also not stirred by the expressions of pride of the Chicano movement (signaled by Chávez, one of its heroes). It's perhaps also illustrative of how the poem deals with memory: moments once metabolized by the young speaker in the idioms of childhood—cartoons and goldfish—float to the surface of the present with the strange sheen of that which is unresolved.

It's sometimes difficult to gauge the closeness of this relationship. We know that the father playfully mocks the son, calling him nicknames like "Scarecrow." At one point, the son wakes to his father's thumb in his mouth like a gun: "¿No qué no / tronabas pistolita?" Literally "I thought you wouldn't go off little gun," the phrase could mean something like *I thought you didn't have it in you* or *I got you*—"tronar" a possible euphemism for killing or being killed. In any case, we get the sense that the father might be playfully enacting a scene in a Western or a corrido where two rivals are finally facing off. There is a sense of intimidation or violence lurking beneath the surface

of this moment, which is also made tender by the use of the diminutive—"pistolita," perhaps a nickname for the son. The ironic distance and humor sprinkled throughout the poem—the "¡No mames!" (you're kidding, stop kidding around) that directly follows the father's proverb on heartbreak—is perhaps as much the father's way of relating to his son as it is a sense that has "percolated" into the son's own way of beholding his father, and possibly his way of dealing with the more difficult facets of their relationship.

Despite these ambiguities, the speaker still strongly identifies with his father: "Again and again I borrow his clothes"; "When I walk through / the desert, I wear his shirt. The gaze of the moon / stitches the buttons of his shirt to my skin." In this melding of fabric and flesh, the boundaries between father and son become blurred.

The poem ends with the enigmatic line: "The snake hisses. The snake is torn." We're left with the cryptic resonance of previous lines but none of the humor. The rupture of the snake—absent in the reference to the father's favorite belt buckle—opens the ending to multiple interpretations. The snake could gesture to the fall from Eden, a reading that, compounded with the reference to the Aztec myth, might illustrate a fundamental separation between the speaker and his father, who is likely also his primary tether to his Mexican identity. It could also suggest that the son has partially moved beyond the shadow of his father's influence. At the same time, if the snake evokes for the reader a hidden or lurking threat, its being torn could signify that the son has moved past the precarity his father faced. The image might denote his ambiguous feelings about having, in some way, left his father behind. In any case, the reader is left with what is likely an intentional feeling of irresolution, and the questions that the poem doesn't answer might mirror the ways in which the speaker is still grappling with the image of his father.

"In Colorado My Father Scoured and Stacked Dishes" is a smartly misleading title, the blunt description of what the father *does* failing to do justice to the man he *is*, as revealed by the portrait that follows. More than just a powerful commentary on the plight of an undocumented man—whose struggles resonate with those of a larger community—the poem sheds

light on the complex bond between a father and a son and the cultural and material forces that pull them apart as much as they bring them together.

Laurie Ann Guerrero's "Put Attention" explores the difficulties of communication within a bilingual family, centering on the literal translation by the poet's grandmother of the Spanish phrase "*Ponga atención*," whose idiomatic equivalent in English is "Pay attention." In an interview, Guerrero noted: "Thinking back to the time when we as children laughed at our undereducated grandmother, how we wanted her to speak clear English because that's what they wanted in our Texas public schools—I was very ashamed. No one would know my parents' first language was Spanish, and that because of this, my first language was English. There is still a very real stigma that affects my generation, my parents' generation, even my children's generation. Already as children we had internalized this racism, and it is still being perpetuated in the community." In the speaker of the poem's remembered attitude toward her grandmother's English, we see a reflection of the shame instilled in her as a child with regard to Spanish, and the ways language can be wielded, tinged with violence: "we threw / down shards of English . . . for her to leap in and / around."

The poem hinges on the repetition of the mistranslation, evoking the urgency of a grandmother trying to communicate with younger family members. And perhaps what Guerrero reveals in the making of this poem is the desire to retroactively bridge a cultural gap. She carefully re-creates a childhood space shared by the speaker and the grandmother through various remembered images: flickering TV shows in Spanish, a statue of the Virgin, family photos. The poem's many artifacts become complex symbols of hybrid cultural identities, from the Texas beer Shiner Bock to the Mexican sweet rice drink horchata, making attention, and what it's directed towards, something that transcends words and demands a deeper, more nuanced understanding, encompassing forms of cultural knowledge at the risk of being lost. Where to "put" one's attention? Answers proliferate, dramatizing how the speaker, when she was young, was unable to take in what her grandmother was saying. Is attention to be "put" in their "hands," signifying a practical skill? Or does it reside in the images from the television, "that

seeps fat red lips and Mexican moustaches”? The act of “putting attention” slowly emerges as both a tangible action and, especially at the end of the poem, an intangible gift.

In the penultimate stanza, the speaker, no longer immersed in childhood memories, still wonders where her attention should go—where to put it. This leads to the final moment of the poem, where the grandmother, now older, is struggling with cognitive impairment, and the poet wishes she could connect with her ailing relative through her own generous and loving act of attention: “Put attention somewhere large. Back into her eyes.”

The repetition of the titular phrase here with the image of “somewhere large” emphasizes the vastness of what “attention” encompasses. We’re left with a sense of grief, the reiterated phrase now ringing with regret. The poet gazes into a kind of emptiness, the part of the grandmother’s brain that can no longer remember even “her own / daughters,” as well as “how to make rice, translate instructions.” Guerrero mourns the now unrecoverable lessons that her grandmother, with her insistence on attention, was trying to impart. And while some of these lessons might have been practical or even inconsequential, the phrase has come to encompass a lost world. Faced with the immensity of this loss, the poet is left with the opportunity to honor her grandmother, to somehow give the gift of attention back to her, and to formulate for herself what those teachings might have been.

As in Guerrero’s poem, Alberto Ríos’s “Nani” depicts family members attempting to communicate across a generational, cultural, and linguistic gap. “Nani” focuses on the unspoken bond between a grandson and his grandmother. Here, food becomes the central motif, bridging the distance between them. The speaker quietly observes and readily accepts the meals Nani prepares, even though he can only speak “a third” of her language. The speaker seems fixated on the words that Nani speaks but which he has forgotten or can no longer articulate properly:

...she serves
the sopa de arroz to me
instinctively, and I watch her,
the absolute *mamá*, and eat words

I might have had to say more
out of embarrassment. To speak,
now-foreign words I used to speak

Nevertheless, a form of silent communication emerges between the two. Nani's smile and the reiterated images of her "wrinkles" become a map of her life experiences, a wordless language that narrates her struggles and losses: "I see a wrinkle speak / of a man whose body serves / the ants like she serves me, then more words / from more wrinkles about children." "Her insides speak / through a hundred wrinkles." Despite the barrier between him and his grandmother, the speaker accepts her offerings, highlighting a bond built on care and unspoken affection: "Even before I speak, she serves."

All the way to the end, the poem brims with these other kinds of language, with the constant potential for communication. Beyond her wrinkles and smiles, language vividly emerges from the "other mouths" of Nani's many children and inhabits the act of serving, so prevalent throughout the poem. And yet, this might all just be projection, imagined visions of who Nani was and "could have been," inspired by the stories told by her children, the "tremendous string around her, / holding her together." Akin to the relationship with the grandmother in Guerrero's "Put Attention," the full reality of Nani's person, and of everything she might have passed down to her grandson, is partly inaccessible, leaving the poem's speaker to wonder "just how much of me / will die with her." In this regard, the ending takes on a different tone, and what we're left with is perhaps the ritual of serving without a larger dimension of cultural transmission. "What is this thing she serves?" the speaker asks, but it is as if he were really asking: Who am I without knowing whom I come from? And yet, the tenderness of the last line leaves the reader with quiet reassurance; perhaps none of this is as important as the love shared between the grandmother and grandchild in that moment.

In different ways, the poems in this section address an inscrutable or somehow not fully knowable figure who, whether living or gone, continues to haunt the speaker's present. Here, the yearning to understand one's family history, in many ways a universal desire, is made more acute by experiences of cultural

estrangement. And yet, these poems might illuminate how poetic language emerges as a medium through which to communicate, mourn, and honor the past. In helping to reimagine a relationship to absence, through the ghostly and lived matter of memory, the poem becomes a site to reckon with, and define for oneself, the many layers of individual and cultural identity.

Discussion Questions

1. What are the similarities and differences between how the family members in each poem—the father in “In Colorado My Father Scoured and Stacked Dishes,” the grandmother in “Put Attention,” and the grandmother in “Nani”—are depicted? How does the speaker of each poem understand their relationship to these parents and grandparents? How does their relationship to this family member affect the speaker in the poem’s present?
2. How does each poem deal with time? Which verb tenses are used throughout the different poems, and do they change? In each poem, what sense do we get that the past is far away, or alternatively, very close?
3. What are the “memory-objects” or childhood images in each poem? What effect do they have? How does each poet set the scene of their past? How does the presence of “Bugs Bunny” in Eduardo C. Corral’s poem contrast with the “fat red lips and Mexican moustaches” seeping from the television in Laurie Ann Guerrero’s poem?
4. What lessons have the speakers been able to gain from their parent or grandparent? What lessons might they have missed?
5. How do experiences of migration or of linguistic or cultural estrangement affect familial relationships? What is particular to these relationships that might speak to Latinx or diasporic experience more broadly?

Poems for further reading:

Rio Cortez, "Ars Poetica with Mother and Dogs"

Richard Garcia, "My Father's Hands"

Jaime Manrique, "El fantasma de mi padre en dos paisajes
/ My Father's Ghost in Two Landscapes"

Judith Ortiz Cofer, "Because My Mother Burned Her
Legs in a Freak Accident"

Ruth Irupé Sanabria, "Distance"

Virgil Suárez, "El Exilio"

Andrés Cerpa, "The Distance between Love & My
Language"

J. Michael Martinez, "Lord, Spanglish Me"

MUSIC AND PERFORMANCE

VICTOR HERNÁNDEZ CRUZ

Trio Los Condes

Lyre and voice
the ancient serenade
Strings right below myth.
A circle of naked flesh
from the pores comes
the a capella of the Greek
chorus, the Taino Areyto flute
in the dance.
The Polynesian hands of
word waves.
Fingers tracing songs
in the wind.
The harmony creates columns
Each one a color a position
Celestial,
Bodies and objects that have
become sound.
I see plates and saucers
enclosed behind glass,
Small shot glass,
a magnificent oval bottle
of brandy,
Men walking through bluish
plastic curtains
Wearing thin ties and silky
suits.
All blue motion, red dance
the chains of Andalusia
broken loose,
What caramel would sing
if given a mouth.
In Cuba the rumba slowed down,
oil of the drummers' hands,
following the lament of the voice,

a mass tribute to the female form
The moon coming down as nickels
for the nickelodeon
Push H-7
Los Condes sing, "Amor de mis amores"
and bring back a skinny Agustín Lara
sitting in the margins of Rubén Darío's
poems
From San Francisco to New York,
a guitar sticks out of a '57 Packard
Moving through streets that are hills
open highway Interstate 10
all the way heartbreaking voyage
To the smog of the east coast
pipes.

They were the counts of a
monarchy of boleros,
For inspiration Pedro Flores flowers
the same,
The bridge of a woman's eyes
The sense of her yellow dress.
Not philosophy of ideas but
the Eros of touch
Skin lyrics
Boleros are flesh poetry
They respire the air you are,
in the distance of oblivion,
recall the picture of all the sweet
truth that floats in the lake of
her eyes,
That this caress was the night star
of your walk coming to my adobe
Toward my heart orphaned of kisses,
amor does not part through eternities,
Have we guessed the clear beauty
of who shines
Who trembles in a voice
The words that belong to men
ink upon the papyrus-woman,

Rhapsody that converts black
hair into white roses.

We've got to have the world
the soil and its birds.
Walk through paths
of folding bamboos
Bring songs
through deserted streets.
We want the ports of the Americas
visible and flagrant
bongos in the undercurrent
moving like ships
below the wings of the strings.
The kiss from the window
reaching the street eye.
Pageantry-Ceremony
People who allow themselves
to be penetrated by words,
Suggestion of freshly brewed desire
sacrificing bodies to the songs
Convinced of illusion.
Such is what Los Condes bring
a memorial pastry of harmonious illusions
songs climbing walls of bricks
Entering through the open window
Into a head that momentarily lifts
from a pillow
only to settle back into the abyss.

WILLIAM ARCHILA

Duke Ellington, Santa Ana, El Salvador, 1974

He paces the cool, dusty classroom,
hands in his pockets, rows of chairs,
sixth-grade children looking straight
at him, watching his big-band walk.

At the blackboard, he turns
and breaks the silence.
“Instead of crossing an Oriental garden,
picture a desert under a devil sun.”

He snaps his fingers two plus one
as if to say one more time.
We shout back a demented version of *Caravan*,
crashing cymbals, drums, bent horns—
muffled rhythms from a line of saxophones.

Edwin Martínez gets on his feet, leans over
the music stand and tortures the trumpet,
pouring all his memories of Egypt from history class.
Douglas Díaz slaps the bongos
exactly the same way he beats on
cans of coffee and milk at home.

Señor Ellington claps his hands along,
dancing a two-step blues, stomping
in the center of everyone like a traffic cop
conducting a busy city street.
Before break he will tell us
stories of a smoky blue spot
called the Cotton Club.
We will learn all the Harlem rhapsodies
from the Latin Quarter up to 125th Street.
He will swing the piano keys, a syncopated phrase
and we will listen: no need to study war no more.

He could be my grandfather,
black boy from Chalatenango—
indigo-blue family
from the Caribbean through Honduras.
He could be the one to write
a tone parallel to Sonsonate,
a trombone to roll to the wheels
of a cart, the wrinkled man,
toothless, pulling his corn.

More than a Congo drum in a cabaret,
more than a top hat and tails before a piano,
I want him to come back,
his orchestra to pound the doors
of a ballroom by the side of a lake.
I want the cracked paint to peel off the walls,
lights to go dim, floors to disappear,
a trumpet to growl,
my country to listen.

WILLIE PERDOMO

Arroz con Son y Clave

My father used to leave sharp sounds
By the door, steady conga heads were
Rare. When you party with grown-ups,
You learn not to suffer dancers a weak
Hand; otherwise a safe return to silence
Becomes less of a road—no yesterday.
The great readers, he would say, quote
From the kitchen. Yes, chops—cook,
Steam like jabs, stories, walls that sob
I'm sorry. In the middle of a sacrifice,
Death always has a shape to introduce:
Breath deflates & balloons a club like
An amateur soul drowning in whisper.

Essay by Michael Dowdy

THE MUSICAL traditions of the Americas—from the Southern Cone to Mexico, from the Caribbean and the U.S. South to New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles—have been abundant sources for Latino poetry. Sometimes, to borrow Victor Hernández Cruz’s words in “Trio Los Condes,” these traditions have been the “bongos in the undercurrent” of Latino poems. An undercurrent moves beneath a visible surface—but sometimes, in Latino poems, the surface itself vanishes. In “Duke Ellington, Santa Ana, El Salvador, 1974,” William Archila imagines the legendary bandleader’s orchestra causing the “floors to disappear.” Similarly, in Cruz’s “Latin & Soul,” the pianist attempts “to lift the stage into orbit.”

Most often, Latino poems present surfaces that are much more than meet the eye (and the ear). Willie Perdomo’s “Arroz con Son y Clave” dramatizes a mysterious domestic scene starring the speaker’s enigmatic, musical family. The poem begins with an unusual phrase, “My father used to leave sharp sounds / By the door.” Did this happen when he departed from or returned to their apartment? Were the “sharp sounds” yells, horn blows, or, more mundanely, house keys? Here, we should return to the poem’s equally unusual title. “Arroz con Son y Clave” underscores why I encourage students to linger on a poem’s title for two beats longer than they do on a novel’s. Perdomo’s title immediately subverts the reader’s expectations. *Arroz con pollo* (chicken and rice), the popular pan-Latino dish, is here served with substitutions: “Son y Clave.”

“Arroz con Son y Clave” demonstrates how multilingual wordplay becomes the synesthetic music of Latino poetry. This is often true even in a monolingual poem like Perdomo’s. In Spanish, “son” alludes to *son cubano*, an influential music of the African diaspora. (It may also allude to the related *son jarocho*, from Veracruz, Mexico.) In English, “son” is the father’s son, the poem’s speaker. “Clave” refers to the 1-2 *pause* 1-2-3 rhythm that Cruz calls “the undertow of any Latin tune.” A *clave* is also a wooden stick used for percussion. And, wait, there’s more. In Spanish, a *clave* is also a clue, often translated

as “key.” ¡Y más! *Clave* rhymes with *llave*, the metal key the father drops in a bowl by the door. One “key” is literal, the other figurative. One unlocks the door, the second helps us understand what’s happening behind it.

Before spending more time on Latino poetry’s distinctive forms of play, let’s set the stage with some historical background on these musical influences. The following are some crucial wellsprings for Latino poetry:

1. “Latin” music from the Caribbean, including Cuba, Colombia, the Dominican Republic, Mexico, and Puerto Rico, such as son, bomba, salsa, plena, rumba, mambo, and reggaetón. Many of these musical practices (frequently inflected with religious ones) emerged from the syntheses of African diasporic and Indigenous cultures. This music travels to New York, with the great migration of Puerto Ricans during the 1950s (see Cruz’s “Trio Los Condes”), and to Miami, with the arrival of Cubans (see Adrian Castro’s “When Hearing Bata Drums” and Gustavo Pérez Firmat’s “Last Mambo in Miami” in the *Latino Poetry* anthology). For a Colombian iteration, check out Jaime Manrique’s “Mambo.”
2. Indigenous Mexican poetry (“Flor y Canto” [Flower and Song]) and traditional Mexican ballads (corridos). In the late 1960s and early 1970s, Chicano movement poets borrowed from and reinvented both of these traditions. The neologism “Floricanto,” which was derived from the Spanish translation of the Nahuatl (Mexica/Aztec) term for poetry (“Flor y Canto”), galvanized a community of poets and activists. See the poems by Francisco X. Alarcón, Alurista, José Montoya, and Ricardo Sánchez in the *Latino Poetry* anthology. For further background, consult Alfred Arteaga’s *Chicano Poetics: Heterotexts and Hybridities* and José E. Limón’s *Mexican Ballads, Chicano Poems: History and Influence in Mexican American Social Poetry*.
3. Black American music, including jazz, blues, and hip-hop. Archila’s poem asks what it means to listen to

“Señor Ellington” in an El Salvador on the cusp of civil war. He imagines Ellington as a family member: “He could be my grandfather” or a “black boy from Chalatenango.” This vision charts one of the many forms of hemispheric Blackness in Latino poetry. For one example of hip-hop’s influence, read the Afro-Chicano poet John Murillo (see “Santayana, the Muralist”), whose poems include a cheeky remix of the Notorious B.I.G.’s song “Juicy.”

These multiple musical legacies are institutionalized in organizations such as CantoMundo (“Song-World”). The national literary organization has a well-established mission to “cultivate a community of Latinx poets” and to celebrate “the worlds of song within Latinx communities.”

In Latino poetry, the poet plays the language the way a musician plays their instrument. Many Latino poets, moreover, play multiple language-instruments. The poems of Francisco X. Alarcón are superb examples. With a partner, try reading aloud Urayoán Noel’s bilingual poem “No Longer Ode / Oda Indebida.” This “self-translated” ode to Noel’s abuela after Hurricane María concludes with her “ache song.” One partner can read the English-language lines, the other one the alternating lines in Spanish. Even a place-name can be music in the hands of a Latino poet. Consider how the name “Sonsonate” sings near the end of Archila’s poem.

Most powerfully, like band members gathering across time and space, poets play off, and with, other poets. In Perdomo’s poem, the word “chops” signifies the kitchen task as well as the slang term for outstanding musical technique. Consider how music, food, and poetry converge as sources of both community and tragedy in Martín Espada’s “Alabanza: In Praise of Local 100.” Espada’s poem is dedicated to the forty-three workers who died at the Windows on the World restaurant on September 11, 2001. The first stanza ends:

Alabanza. Praise the kitchen radio, dial clicked
even before the dial on the oven, so that music and
Spanish
rose before bread. Praise the bread. *Alabanza.*

In “Alabanza,” music is intimately related to work and labor, those other common wellsprings for Latino poetry: “Praise the busboy’s music, the *chime-chime* / of his dishes and silverware in the tub.” Like Espada’s poem, Pedro Pietri’s epic poem “Puerto Rican Obituary” perceives food through the lens of Puerto Ricans’ ruthlessly exploited labor. Although

They worked
ten days a week
and were only paid for five
[. . .]
All died
hating the grocery stores
that sold them make-believe steak
and bullet-proof rice and beans

Pietri’s poem of the colonized condition and the foreclosed American Dream ends with a vision of collective transcendence that emphasizes music. As in “Alabanza,” this utopian Puerto Rican space-time is “where beautiful people sing / and dance and work together.”

“Puerto Rican Obituary” brings us to the topic of performance in Latino poetry. Pietri’s poem reminds us that performance has been as important to Latino poetry as music has. Pietri first performed the poem in December 1969, in the basement of Spanish Harlem’s First Spanish United Methodist Church, during a Young Lords rally. The fact that “Puerto Rican Obituary” didn’t appear in print until two years later underscores the primacy of the poem’s performative dimensions. While the dominant poetry traditions in the U.S. have ascribed to a rigid hierarchy of value between print and performance poetries, Latino poets have validated (and elevated) oral forms while also bridging the divide between the page and the stage. In short, the voice and the body have been powerful instruments. As Cruz suggests in “Trio Los Condes,” the body “become[s] sound.”

When spoken word and slam poetry grew to national popularity in the 1980s and 1990s, it did so on the institutional groundwork laid by the Nuyorican Poets’ Café. Founded in 1973 on Manhattan’s Lower East Side by Miguel Algarín (see

“Nuyorican Angel Papo”) and grown with help from Pietri, Sandra María Esteves, Miguel Piñero, and many others, the Nuyorican would later nurture the otherworldly talents of Edwin Torres (see “[noyoyo]”) and María Teresa Fernández (Mariposa). Mariposa’s “Ode to the Diasporican” exemplifies the creative energy of Latino performance. When she declares that “summer nights were filled with city noises/ instead of coquis,” she highlights the necessity of making music from noise and dissonance as well as birdsong and instruments. For further reading on this tradition, check out Urayoán Noel’s *In Visible Movement: Nuyorican Poetry from the Sixties to Slam*.

Then there are the rare Latino poets who have drawn from all these musical and performance traditions and more. The Chicano poet Juan Felipe Herrera was the first Latino Poet Laureate of California and the first Latino Poet Laureate of the United States. His poems draw widely (and wildly) from blues, jazz, rock ’n’ roll (the guitarist Carlos Santana has been a muse), hip-hop, Latin music, Indigenous song, and multiethnic performance traditions, among numerous other sources. And then there are the brilliant poets for whom music and performance aren’t central to their writing but whose poems make their own music: Lorna Dee Cervantes, Sandra Cisneros, J. Michael Martinez, and many, many more.

Discussion Questions

1. What are some of the specific musical effects achieved in these poems through language and rhythm? How do they compare with the experience of actual music?
2. What is the effect of music on the body in these poems? What is its effect on the mind?
3. Choose one of the three poems, and imagine it being set to music (its words sung and/or spoken). What genre of music would you choose as its accompaniment?
4. Music has a social dimension, bringing people together to sing, to dance, and to listen. What are some of the ways music affects its listeners and their relations to one another in these poems?
5. In William Archila's poem, set during his childhood in El Salvador, a visit from legendary jazz musician Duke Ellington leaves a lasting impression. What was Ellington able to communicate to Archila's sixth-grade class, and why do you think it is important for the poet to share that memory?
6. Victor Hernández Cruz's poem is named for the well-known Puerto Rican group Trio Los Condes, but it begins by evoking ancient music, "the a capella of the Greek / chorus, the Taino Areyto flute in the dance." (The Taino were the Indigenous inhabitants living in Puerto Rico and elsewhere in the Caribbean when the Spanish colonizers arrived.) Why might the poet want to have begun his poem so far back in history?

Poems for further reading

Victor Hernandez Cruz, "Latin & Soul"

Adrian Castro, "When Hearing Bàtá Drums,"

Gustavo Pérez Firmat, "Last Mambo in Miami"

Steven Alvarez, "1992/ 5th sun / our present"

José Martí, "de *Versos Sencillos* / from *Simple Verses*"

Jaime Manrique, "Mambo"

Emmy Pérez, "Laredo Riviera"

Sandra María Esteves, "Mambo Love Poem"; "Black
Notes and 'You Do Something To Me'"

John Murillo, "Santayana the Muralist"

Robert Vasquez, "At the Rainbow"

See also the song lyrics in the anthology's "Corridos and
Nostalgia Songs" section

LABOR

BLAS MANUEL DE LUNA

To Hear the Leaves Sing

Going down Highway 99, to Modesto,
I see an orange glow in the sky.
At first I think it is a fire, but, as I get closer,
it is the lights of a packinghouse,
where women work through the night,
giving up the fire of their lives,
to get the peaches to market.

Ten minutes later I pass
the Avenue 20 off-ramp, the ramp
that, in summers, would take me
to the peach fields of Madera,
where, as the sun rose to its peak
in the brilliant sky,
and the bitter dust
settled in my throat,
I would stand on a ladder,
my heavy sack pulling me down,
and throw peaches, as fast
as I could, into the trees,
to hear the leaves sing,
the tiny branches break.

GINA FRANCO

The Line

a serious surplus population that needs eliminating

So now we are equals, verdad? All along eyeing the same
banks,
as though we might surface on the same shore, bare backs
to the sun, wet shirts in hand, boots aside, those too.
You keep saying, *El otro lado*. See you there,
face to face, no worries.

The last good lynching
was long ago. Ropes, belts, canteens sway in the tree. The
tree
sings with lightness. In time, the fruit shrank in the heat,
grinned
wide from the bone, dropped to the dirt.

Rot. The earthworm's
heart, this now. A knot, a fishing spot.
The sweet-blood smell of the hook right through, the
impaled
form, right through, either soft end writhing on the line.
Beneath the surface, neither vertebral nor articulate, it sways
under water—guts in skin—it sways from the other side,
verdad,
not a lure but a rumor, a mirror, of a parallel end;

we'd fished the shallows with stripped willows,
with a hellgrammite drifting in the current,
and that's where we trapped our leviathan,
iridescent scales that slid away from our hands,
where we crossed the swinging bridge and found
effigy and sign, *Death to scabs crossing the line*,
a volleyball head and a pair of shovels for limbs,
the hanging white sheet, the slashed body of many:

the hanging white sheet, the slashed body of many:
a volleyball head and a pair of shovels for limbs,
effigy and sign, *Death to scabs crossing the line*,
where we crossed the swinging bridge and found
iridescent scales that slid away from our hands,
and that's where we trapped our leviathan,
with a hellgrammite drifting in the current,
we'd fished the shallows with stripped willows

y verdad, the cities on either side of the river watch
one another from the eyes of their televisions.
Their headlines race beneath glass

*—they have taken my father's body
and I do not know where they have laid him—*

and light. Love as the sinker, the line sinking deep. The last
time
I saw my father was in a dream, seated on every side of the
table
of ancestors, and belonging so fully, he ceased
to exist. They arrived
on the other side, at the tree at the end of this world, and the
tree
drank deeply. Love as a secret, unbearable map. Tell
me—*verdad*—
where you have laid the body (and

I will bear
him away. I
will bear him a-
way. I will bear
him a way).

MARTÍN ESPADA

Alabanza: In Praise of Local 100

*for the 43 members of Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees
Local 100, working at the Windows on the World restaurant, who
lost their lives in the attack on the World Trade Center*

Alabanza. Praise the cook with a shaven head
and a tattoo on his shoulder that said *Oye*,
a blue-eyed Puerto Rican with people from Fajardo,
the harbor of pirates centuries ago.
Praise the lighthouse in Fajardo, candle
glimmering white to worship the dark saint of the sea.

Alabanza. Praise the cook's yellow Pirates cap
worn in the name of Roberto Clemente, his plane
that flamed into the ocean loaded with cans for Nicaragua,
for all the mouths chewing the ash of earthquakes.

Alabanza. Praise the kitchen radio, dial clicked
even before the dial on the oven, so that music and Spanish
rose before bread. Praise the bread. *Alabanza.*

Praise Manhattan from a hundred and seven flights up,
like Atlantis glimpsed through the windows of an ancient aquarium.
Praise the great windows where immigrants from the kitchen
could squint and almost see their world, hear the chant of nations:
Ecuador, México, República Dominicana,
Haiti, Yemen, Ghana, Bangladesh.

Alabanza. Praise the kitchen in the morning,
where the gas burned blue on every stove
and exhaust fans fired their diminutive propellers,
hands cracked eggs with quick thumbs
or sliced open cartons to build an altar of cans.
Alabanza. Praise the busboy's music, the *chime-chime*
of his dishes and silverware in the tub.

Alabanza. Praise the dish-dog, the dishwasher
who worked that morning because another dishwasher

could not stop coughing, or because he needed overtime
to pile the sacks of rice and beans for a family
floating away on some Caribbean island plagued by frogs.
Alabanza. Praise the waitress who heard the radio in the kitchen
and sang to herself about a man gone. *Alabanza*.

After the thunder wilder than thunder,
after the shudder deep in the glass of the great windows,
after the radio stopped singing like a tree full of terrified frogs,
after night burst the dam of day and flooded the kitchen,
for a time the stoves glowed in darkness like the lighthouse in Fajardo,
like a cook's soul. *Soul* I say, even if the dead cannot tell us
about the bristles of God's beard because God has no face,
soul I say, to name the smoke-beings flung in constellations
across the night sky of this city and cities to come.
Alabanza I say, even if God has no face.

Alabanza. When the war began, from Manhattan and Kabul
two constellations of smoke rose and drifted to each other,
mingling in icy air, and one said with an Afghan tongue:
Teach me to dance. We have no music here.
And the other said with a Spanish tongue:
I will teach you. Music is all we have.

Essay by Daniel Borzutzky

IN DECEMBER 1969, the New York branch of the radical civil rights organization the Young Lords (also known as the Young Lords Party) took over the First Spanish Methodist Church in Harlem. For eleven days, the organization occupied what it renamed the “People’s Church,” offering breakfast, health, and other community programs. Pedro Pietri recited his poem “Puerto Rican Obituary” at this historic takeover and at other demonstrations and activist gatherings. For Pietri and the Young Lords Party, the struggle for labor rights was enmeshed with the struggle against colonialist, capitalist, and racist imperialism. Moreover, as the YLP’s 13-Point Program makes clear, the organization’s primary political demand was for self-determination for not only “Puerto Ricans” but “all Latinos” and “all third world people.”¹ Inspired by the Black Panther Party, the Young Lords similarly became a target of the FBI’s COINTELPRO operation, which targeted political groups deemed subversive with the aim of disbanding them.

In “Puerto Rican Obituary,” Pietri writes:

They worked
They were always on time
They were never late
They never spoke back
when they were insulted
They worked
They never took days off
that were not on the calendar
They never went on strike
without permission
They worked
ten days a week

¹ See Darrel Enck-Wanzer, ed., *The Young Lords: A Reader* (New York: NYU Press, 2010).

and were only paid for five
They worked
They worked
They worked
and they died
They died broke
They died owing
They died never knowing
what the front entrance
of the first national city bank looks like

Latinx poetry has long contributed to resistance movements and organizing in the face of racial and economic violence, and in “Puerto Rican Obituary,” the YLP activists and supporters clearly saw a reality they recognized. “Puerto Rican Obituary” speaks poignantly and musically about the unequal position of Puerto Rican laborers in the continental U.S. Without the representation of a union, they are unable to challenge their employers. Furthermore, their status as racialized, colonial subjects makes them second-class citizens who do not receive protective legal rights.

“Puerto Rican Obituary” repeats the names of its protagonists (Juan, Miguel, Olga, Milagros, Manuel) so as to make their presence more pronounced. Their lives are demarcated by work, death, and debt. Through repetition, rhyme, and a rhythm that is performatively propulsive, Pietri shows us how the deadening quality of labor exploitation turns a community against itself.

Juan
died hating Miguel because Miguel’s
used car was in better running condition
than his used car
Miguel
died hating Milagros because Milagros
had a color television set
and he could not afford one yet
Milagros
died hating Olga because Olga
made five dollars more on the same job [. . .]

The competition to live a life in lesser poverty than your neighbor's destroys communities. "Puerto Rican Obituary" keeps these struggles from being invisible, and in the process it illustrates how the death drive of labor and capital leaves poor people filled with hatred for both themselves and their neighbors. As the poem progresses, however, we see the possibility of transformation through a recognition rooted in, on the one hand, a liberatory Puerto Rican nationalism and, on the other, a recognition and resignification of the racist and classist ideologies that have enabled this communal destruction.

PUERTO RICO IS A BEAUTIFUL PLACE
 PUERTORIQUENOS ARE A BEAUTIFUL RACE
 If only they
 Had turned off the television
 And tune into their own imaginations
 If only they
 Had used the white supremacy bibles
 For toilet paper purpose
 And make their latino souls
 The only religion of their race [. . .]

As the poem ends, Pietri asks us to imagine a Black and brown utopia where Spanish is not demonized or criminalized and where, in fact, Spanglish is the lingua franca of an organized and powerful community.

Aqui
 Se Habla Espanol
 All the time . . .
 Aqui Que Pasa Power is what's happening

If Pietri's "Puerto Rican Obituary" illustrates the anticapitalist struggles of urban workers and the sociocultural consequences of those struggles, then Gina Franco's "The Line" takes us to the borderlands of the Southwest and the murderous realities of white supremacy and genocide, beginning with the poem's epigraph from an unattributed quote in a newspaper in Texas during the 1910s, referring to Mexican migrants and

Mexican Americans: “a serious surplus population that needs eliminating.”² Repeated references to “the line” in this poem are unfixed. The line refers, at once, to the border between the United States and Mexico; a fishing line used to catch a “leviathan,” and a picket line that will lead to death if crossed. The speaker of the poem is plural; “we” are in a river, perhaps the Rio Grande, and we are eyeing “El Otro Lado.” However, there are no illusions about safety or happiness on the U.S. side. The “we” in the river do not imagine a United Statesian promised land. Instead, we see violent imagery: “Ropes, belts, can-tees sway in the tree” even though “The last good lynching / was long ago.” This presumably refers to the history of Mexicans lynched by white supremacists in the borderlands in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. While these lynchings may have happened in the past, the poem’s speakers understand that there are still white supremacist dangers awaiting migrants when they cross, be they mercenary vigilantes like the Minutemen, who hunt and capture border crossers, or Border Patrol agents and the police, whose well-documented practices of racist abuse toward migrants animate the realities of a state that abuses human rights in its supposed “protection” of the border.

“Lines” are not the only things that are blurred in Franco’s poem. “The sweet-blood smell of the hook right through, the impaled / form” suggests that the characters have ostensibly caught a fish, but the references to lynching remind us that this fish might also be a person, who “sways / under water—guts in skin—it sways from the other side, verdad.”

In “The Line,” labor, always infused with danger, is about sustenance: fishing for food and crossing the border to survive. While in Latinx history, labor organizing has been a fundamental means of improving lives, in this poem something darker is happening at the intersection of migration and unionization. As they are fishing in the river, the “we” of the poem

...crossed the swinging bridge and found
effigy and sign, *Death to scabs crossing the line*,

² As cited on the website of the organization Refusing to Forget (<https://refusingtoforget.org/thehistory/>).

a volleyball head and a pair of shovels for limbs,
the hanging white sheet, the slashed body of many

These lines are unsettling. The scabs are obviously those who might cross a picket line. But the poem makes us think that perhaps the scabs might also be migrants who are crossing a different line, the border. And indeed, the hyperbolic and politically convenient fear that Latinx migrants might “replace” U.S. workers has for decades fueled the rhetoric and violence of the anti-immigration movement. Unions, of course, have historically improved the lives of Latinx workers by increasing wages, expanding employment rights, fostering solidarities to create political power. But the labor movement is not a monolith; and unions have also had a history of scapegoating immigrants. As noted in the *San Antonio Current* in 2015: “in the 1960s and 1970s during labor strikes, companies would hire undocumented immigrants as scabs in attempts to break union strikes.”³ On a larger level, Chavez and the United Farm Workers held complex and often unfriendly views toward the undocumented. Nevertheless, as we see in the poem, the dangers of migrant life are multiple: in the crossing of lines and borders; in the unregulated and often perilous work that immigrant laborers are subjected to; and in the violent response of white supremacists and xenophobes who propagate narratives of replacement and erasure.

This poem bears a poignant connection to Valerie Martínez’s 2010 book *Each and Her*. In this spare, powerful book, Martínez documents with facts, names, and narratives the deaths of hundreds of young Mexican girls and women along the U.S.-Mexico border. Many of these women worked in the foreign-owned factories known as maquiladoras and were subjected to torture, rape, and murder.

the number of girls and women
working in the post-NAFTA
maquiladora industry

³ Mark Reagan, “Cesar Chavez’s Legacy Includes Controversial Immigration Stance,” *San Antonio Current*, April 1, 2015, <https://www.sacurrent.com/news/candeaucutesar-chavez-legacy-includes-controversial-immigration-stance-2413773>.

472,423

while they can be hired legally
at the age of 16, it is common
for these girl-women
to get false documents
start work at 12, 13, 14

Another section of *Each and Her* simply lists names of women and the dates of their deaths:

Jessica Lizalde Leon (3.14.93)
Lorenza Isela González (4.25.94)
Erica Garcia Morena (7.16.95)

Each and Her asks us to pronounce the names of the dead, to acknowledge the infernos they lived through; Martínez's poems root us, without abstraction, in the female lives that were lost at the intersection of capitalism, narco-violence, and government and military collusion.

Each and Her harks back to Muriel Rukeyser's "The Book of the Dead" (from her collection *U.S. 1*, 1938), a seminal work of documentary poetry that uses testimonies, congressional records, and medical diagnoses, among other documentary evidence, to make visible those who suffered and died in the Hawk's Nest Tunnel disaster in Gauley Bridge, West Virginia, in 1930. Rukeyser famously stated that "poetry can extend the document," and in the process it can give voice to those who are excluded from official records. This impulse to extend the document drives Martínez's *Each and Her*. Interestingly, like Pietri, Martínez focuses on names and invites us to say them out loud and to investigate their lives. If the historical and political records won't properly acknowledge the lives of the dead, then for Martínez and other Latinx writers, poetry can acknowledge these absences and counteract them by keeping the memories of these slain workers and women alive.

Martínez also gives us an entryway into the gendered aspects of labor and migration, with which we might consider the untold sacrifices of female workers. This notion, often

attributed to societal expectations of femininity—the sacrifices of childbirth, motherhood, etc.—is all the more weighted given the reality of racialized labor exploitation. Adopting a much different approach, Blas Manuel de Luna memorializes the women who give up “the fire of their lives / to get the peaches to the market” in his poem “To Hear the Leaves Sing.” Here, the women remain nameless and voiceless, and it’s almost as if the poem’s speaker wishes to reverse the injustices that have been done to them by throwing peaches back into the trees. But only “the leaves sing, / the tiny branches break,” observations that gesture, perhaps, to the vast wordlessness surrounding the stories of their lives.

“Alabanza: In Praise of Local 100,” by Martin Espada, is also driven by this same need to acknowledge the lost lives of migrant workers. The poem is dedicated to forty-three kitchen workers and members of the Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees Local 100 who perished in the attack on the World Trade Center. *Alabanza*, the Spanish word for “praise,” is repeated in the poem as if part of a call and response, and the poem spotlights the Latinx workers who provided invisible labor in this center of capitalism and finance.

Praise the great windows where immigrants from the
kitchen
could squint and almost see their world, hear the chant
of nations:

*Ecuador, México, República Dominicana,
Haiti, Yemen, Ghana, Bangladesh.*

Espada’s “Alabanza” offers an analogous gesture to that of “Puerto Rican Obituary” and the Young Lords Party’s advocacy of an international struggle for anticolonial revolution. The Latin American laborers in the World Trade Center worked with and died alongside migrants from Africa, Asia, and the Middle East. “Alabanza” ends with a gesture of solidarity, and, interestingly, it is the Spanish language that provides a bridge between Afghanistan and Manhattan (somewhat akin to the vision of Spanglish as a lingua franca in “Puerto Rican Obituary”). This gesture, along with the poem’s drive to

make visible the Puerto Rican and immigrant kitchen workers, counters the nationalism of the immediate post-9/11 moment, when a dramatic heightening of patriotic and anti-immigrant discourse resulted in racist and xenophobic changes in rhetoric and policy, most conspicuously in the Patriot Act. By centering migrants, Espada provides an alternative history of the World Trade Center attacks that reframes the loss of life through the complicated politics of colonialism, globalization, and migration.

Cecilia Vicuña, a Chilean artist and poet also included in the *Latino Poetry* anthology, and who has been in the U.S. since 1980, shares a similar drive to document the disappearances of Latin American and Latinx laborers. Notably, on September 29, 2001, a few weeks after the attack on the World Trade Center, Vicuña performed at Woodland Pattern Book Center in Milwaukee, and in this performance poem she tells the story of a disappeared man named Luis Gomez, an Ecuadorian migrant living in New York, who was “digging a hole for Con Edison.” Unbeknownst to his employers, Luis was buried underground in July 1998 and died:

And his brother
came to the work place and said:
Where is my brother Luis?
Your brother Luis? Nobody even remembered him
And this is very telling
because this is like our position
the position of the little dark ones
Nobody even notices
whether we are
or we are not
there
And this man, the brother,
insisted: He's here in this hole [TAPPING THE LECTERN]
And they fought him and said no, no he's not
He probably disappeared
He went somewhere else
If he was here we don't remember
Denying the whole thing

Until he pressed, he pressed, he pressed, and finally they
opened the hole and there it was:
Luis, crushed, like this

Of course, he was dead⁴

Vicuña's poem-performance responds to labor exploitation with documentary poetics. When Latinx or migrant laborers are made invisible by the state, their employers, and historical documents, then poets like Pietri, Martínez, De Luna, Espada, and Vicuña, among other Latinx writers, have used their art to inscribe them into the record. In the process, these poets give the workers more respect than their employers ever gave them. Their poems illustrate how, for Latinx communities, poetry has served to document, organize, and imagine alternative worlds.

⁴ Cecilia Vicuña, *New and Selected Poems*, trans. Rose Alcalá (Berkeley, CA: Kelsey Street Press, 2018), 262. An accompanying note in this volume refers the reader to a *New York Times* article about Gomez and his death: <https://www.nytimes.com/1998/07/13/nyregion/us-sojourn-ends-in-debt-and-death-by-burial.html>.

Discussion Questions

1. What might Blas Manuel de Luna's poem reveal about the relationship between unjust working conditions and gender?
2. What is the story being told in Gina Franco's "The Line"? How does the repetition of "the line" mold our understanding of this story? What are its literal meanings and metaphorical connotations? What might this image reveal about the relationships between organized labor and immigration?
3. How does Martín Espada's "Alabanza" help us arrive at a deeper, more multifaceted understanding of the tragedy of September 11? What does it reveal about the perspectives through which history is told? What role does poetry play to complicate and enrich our understanding of history?

Poems for further reading

Lorna Dee Cervantes, “Bananas”

Eduardo C. Corral, “In Colorado My Father Scoured and
Stacked Dishes”

Pedro Pietri, “Puerto Rican Obituary”

Gary Soto, “Mexicans Begin Jogging”

Virgil Suárez, “El Exilio”

Carmen Giménez, “(after Pedro Pietri’s ‘Puerto Rican
Obituary’)”

EARTH, LANDSCAPE,
AND MYTH

NATALIE DIAZ

Tortilla Smoke: A Genesis

In the beginning, light was shaved from its cob,
white kernels divided from dark ones, put to the pestle
until each sparked like a star. By nightfall, tortillas sprang up
from the dust, billowed like a fleet of prairie schooners
sailing a flat black sky, moons hot white
on the blue-flamed stove of the earth, and they were good.

Some tortillas wandered the dry ground
like bright tribes, others settled through the floury ceiling
el cielo de mis sueños, hovering above our tents,
over our beds—floppy white Frisbees, spinning, whirling
like project merry-go-rounds—they were fruitful and
multiplied,
subduing all the beasts, eyeteeth, and bellies of the world.

How we prayed to the tortilla god: to roll us up
like burritos—tight and fat *como porros*—to hold us
in His lips, to be ignited, lit up luminous with Holy Spirit
dancing on the edge of a table, grooving all up and down
the gold piping of the green robe of San Peregrino—
the saint who keeps the black spots away,

to toke and be token, carried up up
away in tortilla smoke, up to the steeple
where the angels and our grandpas live—
porque nuestras madres nos dijeron que viven allí—
high to the top that is the bottom, the side, the side,
the space between, back to the end that is the beginning—

a giant ball of *masa* rolling, rolling, rolling down,
riding hard the arc of earth—gathering rocks, size, lemon
trees, Joshua trees, creosotes, size, spray-painted
blue bicycles rusting in gardens, hunched bow-legged
grandpas in white

undershirts that cover cancers whittling their organs like
thorns
and thistles, like dark eyes wide open, like sin—leaving behind
bits and pieces of finger-sticky dough grandmas mistake
for Communion *y toman la hostia*—it clings to their ribs
like gum they swallowed in first grade.

The grandmas return from *misa*, with full to the brim
estómagos and overflowing souls, to empty homes.
They tie on their aprons. Between their palms they sculpt
and caress,
stroke and press, dozens and dozens of tortillas—stack them
from basement to attic, from wall to wall, crowding closets,
jamming drawers, filling cupboards and *el vacío*.

At night they kiss ceramic statues of Virgin Marys,
roll rosary beads between their index fingers and thumbs,
weep tears prettier than holy water—

*sana sana colita de rana si no sanas ahora sanarás
mañana—*

When they wake they realize frogs haven't had tails in ages,
they hope gravity doesn't last long, and they wait—
y esperan y esperan y esperamos—to be carried up
up—anywhere—
on round white magic carpets and tortilla smoke.

ELIZABETH ACEVEDO

La Ciguapa

For the Antilles

They say La Ciguapa was born on the peak of El Pico
Duarte.

Balled up for centuries beneath the rocks
she sprang out red, covered in boils, dried off black
and the first thing she smelled was her burning hair.

* * *

They say Atabeyra carried La Ciguapa while in frog form—
held her low in the belly until squatting she laid her
into soft dirt: an egg made of ocean. Millenniums later, La
Ciguapa
poked through and the blue water burst, grafted onto her
skin.

* * *

They say La Ciguapa pried apart her jaw
and spit herself out, soft and malleable
but at the last second her legs scraped against fangs
and inverted her footing.

* * *

Her backwards-facing feet were no mistake, they say,
she was never meant to be found, followed—
an unseeable creature of crane legs, saltwater crocodile scales,
long beak of a parrot no music sings forth from.

* * *

La Ciguapa, they say, was made on one of those ships;
stitched
and bewitched from moans and crashing waves. She emerged
entirely formed. Dark and howling, stepped onto the auction
block but none would buy her. They wouldn't even look her
in the eye.

* * *

They say she came beneath the Spanish saddle of the first
mare.

Rubbed together from leather and dark mane. Hungry.
That she has a hoof between her thighs and loves men
like the pestle loves the mortar;

she hums them into the cotton thick fog
of the mountains. They follow her none word sing-song
and try to climb her, tall and dark and rough as sugarcane
and don't know until they're whittled down how they've
scraped

themselves dead. They say the men were the first to undo her
name;
thinking that burying it would rot her magic, that long cry
they were compelled to answer. They hung all five-toed dogs
because they alone knew her scent—

they say there was a time her silhouette shadowed the full
moon.

* * *

They say. They say. They say. Tuh, I'm lying. No one says.
Who tells

her story anymore? She has no mother, La Ciguapa, and no
children,
certainly not her people's tongues. We who have forgotten all
our sacred monsters.

VINCENT TORO

Sonata of the Luminous Lagoon

after Pedro Pietri

Crickets, coquis corroborate. Mezzo.
Alto. Tenor. Chemical coladas are pumped
like stale petroleum from fracked rocks.
The joy of combustion at five dollars a pop.
Surf shops collide with Desecheo Island.
Silicon Valley Spanish stings like chlorine,
an ill refuge from portfolios and defaulted
mortgages seared on grills that serve no native
dish. The esclavos fed-exed to Co-op City,
Humboldt Park, Kensington, where nature
is a cable program shot from a satellite dish
in twenty minute cycles and sunsets come
with membership fees. Coconuts, cangrejos
are gathered and stacked. For tonight there
will be a fiesta in the hacienda overlooking
Culebra, but the residents did not receive
an invitation, Coral contorts into ads for cell
phones. Panorama in flux. Coffee plantation
permuted into port. Cracked conch serves
as chrysalis for research station. A naval base
etched into islet. Yucca fields tailored into
spa resort. The new natives will boast of job

creation and toast to how the quality of life
has improved for the mosquitos who now

feast on sweet meat of plump and primped
immigrants blown in from el norte.

Essay by Vincent Toro

WHEN TEACHING POETRY, I try to guide my students to move beyond identifying some purported “message” of a given poem and instead unpack what work a poem is *doing*: to consider the inner workings of its operating system, the ways it impacts its reader, and how it builds from and contributes to the cultures and communities from and where it was written.

So let’s ask ourselves: What work is Latinx poetry doing? Mythmaking is one possible response. Myths themselves perform important work for the cultures and communities where they are born and in which they circulate. Myths, in the form of folktales and *leyendas* (legends) created and shared within a given community, help make sense of the world, pass on necessary knowledge for survival, imprint cultural values and mores, elevate our daily lives beyond the mundane, and examine history beyond the surface of names and dates. Myths can also help us understand our interconnectedness with nature and in this way heighten our sense of responsibility for the land’s stewardship and care. Given our current ecological crisis, this function of mythmaking becomes all the more urgent and all the more precarious. Contemporary mythmaking might also seek to preserve and at the same time mourn landscapes, species, and traditional forms of caring for the land at risk of extinction.

“Telling folktales in Latin American societies,” writes Rafael Ocasio, “is a popular activity that informally teaches and allows one to ‘make sense of the world people could not control, to reinforce traditions, and to pass along wisdoms.’”¹ For Latinx people, mythmaking is an act of making sense of our situation as colonial subjects and bodies othered by forms of racialized oppression. Colonialism, racism, and patriarchy are systems that, in their exploitation of the land and people

¹ Rafael Ocasio, *Folk Stories from the Hills of Puerto Rico / Cuentos folklóricos de las montañas de Puerto Rico* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2021). Ocasio quotes Sharon Barcan Elswit, *The Latin American Story Finder: A Guide to 470 Tales from Mexico, Central America and South America, Listing Subjects and Sources* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2015), 1.

alike, can seem impossible to overcome. But perhaps through the work of mythmaking and (re)telling our myths, we can attempt to understand the forces behind these systems and imagine how we might liberate ourselves from them.

Let's look at how three Latinx poets go about myth-building.

The Chicano visual artist David Gonzalez once told me how when he was in elementary school in South Texas, he and his compadres would go behind the school to eat their lunches out of sight because some white classmates would bully them if they saw them eating tacos. This might seem difficult to believe or even understand these days porque now everyone loves Mexican food, right? But back when David was still in school (and even now in some places), any sign that one was different—from a person's skin to their clothes to their accent, or even the food they eat—was (is) perceived as a threat by the culture of the oppressor. This pushed (and pushes) many Latinx people, and other people of color, to feel a pressure to assimilate, to try to speak, behave, and look like the oppressor, or to at least try to keep one's markers of difference cloaked.

Juan Bruce-Novoa has addressed this problematic choice Latinx people face between assimilation and preservation of the ancestral homeland. Accepting the ultimatum to assimilate to the oppressor's culture may result in limited material gains, but at the cost of surrendering one's identity and connections to one's community. However, Latinx communities have forged ways of resisting assimilation by endeavoring to preserve the cultures of their homelands through rite and ritual. Bruce-Novoa writes that

the sacred circle of tribal culture becomes the ethnic circle of defensive isolation from the surrounding dominant culture. Rituals from the homeland become the talisman of authenticity, relics of the "true" culture, and eventually the foundation blocks—altar/corner stones—of the new-old culture. The implication is that a community can remain spiritually within its original space, uncontaminated by evil outsiders, by repeating the origin rituals as practiced in the homeland.²

² Juan Bruce-Novoa, "Ritual in Judith Ortiz Cofer's 'The Line of the Sun,'" *Confluencia* 8, no. 1 (1992): 64.

This, in part, is how Latinx people have thwarted attempts by others to render us invisible. By turning our ways into myth and legend through song, poetry, and storytelling, we preserve and elevate our cultures while neutralizing attempts to diminish or erase our histories and practices. Poems like Natalie Diaz's "Tortilla Smoke: A Genesis" do this kind of work for us. Here, the basis for mythmaking is the act of making, sharing, and consuming tortillas.

Indeed, Diaz, who identifies as both Mojave and Latinx and is an enrolled member of the Gila River Indian Tribe, has observed: "Even though most people use the word 'myth' to speak of our tribal stories, we see them as truth. So, for me, myth has always been the truest truth. The word 'history' on the other hand, we question." Here, the work of mythmaking also becomes a form of record-keeping that questions dominant narratives that do not, and cannot, encompass the histories of oppressed peoples.

The poem opens thus with that most quintessential of creation-myth phrases, "In the beginning," and concludes its first stanza with "and they were good," evoking the language and structure found in the opening of the Bible's book of Genesis. Here, the tortilla transcends being mere food and becomes "a fleet of prairie schooners / sailing a flat black sky," "bright tribes" and "merry-go-rounds" that multiply to feed the world.

Throughout the poem, Diaz likens the making of tortillas to a spiritual ritual, referencing the Holy Spirit, saints, and prayers when describing tortillas being created and consumed. The poem offers a syncretic vision of the universe in its blending of Catholicism—*hostias*, *misas*, the Virgin Mary—with corn, central to many belief systems throughout the Americas, from the Maize God of the Mayas to the Corn Mother of the Pueblo, Cherokee, and many other North American tribes. But the poem also interweaves the sacred with the profane in surprising and irreverent phrases such as "to toke and be token," where the tortilla God rolls up the people "*como porros*" (like joints) as they are "lit up luminous with Holy Spirit." While they remain steeped in reverence and wonder, there is a subversiveness to the unlikely scenarios the poem proposes. Yet this melding of the humorous with the holy, which incorporates the

rite into the space of the colloquial, is not entirely dissimilar to the ways Christianity (primarily Catholicism) has been re-ritualized throughout the colonized world. Indeed, syncretism marked the response by colonized peoples to Western religions used to violently assimilate them. Syncretic aesthetic and spiritual forms are evidence of Indigenous peoples incorporating Christian elements into their own cultures and making Christian symbols their own: a creative form of resistance (and survival) in the face of cultural erasure.

As the tortilla multiplies and travels the world it ends up spanning time, connecting generations, and transcending space, “gathering rocks, size, lemon / trees, Joshua trees, creosotes, size, spray-painted / blue bicycles rusting in gardens.” The mythical tortillas descend into people’s homes, slowly leaving behind “bits and pieces of finger-sticky dough.” We’re offered glimmers of the starker social realities in which the poem is steeped: the grandpas in white undershirts and the “cancers whittling their organs like thorns,” a line that also resonates with the earlier allusion to San Peregrino, patron of all those suffering from cancer, AIDS, and other life-threatening illnesses.

In this cyclone-like time warp, the everyday is projected onto the space of the mythical—or vice versa. Indeed, the poem proposes a kind of cosmological inversion, where the social ritual of tortilla-making, which reflects a sophisticated cultural technology—the masa out of which tortillas are made having undergone the complex ancient Mesoamerican process of nixtamalization that makes the corn’s nutrients easier to absorb—becomes the “natural” or “original” element at the source of myth: the “light” that is “shaved from its cob.” It’s almost as if the poem were proposing that ritual *precedes* myth or metaphor. Here, ritual becomes instead a tangible cultural practice that is in tune with the earth and the sustenance it provides.

In the poem’s final stanzas, grandmothers return from mass to continue their prayers by making more tortillas for the world to enjoy, only to awake as if from a dream and “realize frogs haven’t had tails in ages” (a reference to the rhyme used to console children: *sana sana colita de rana*) and ascend, once more, on “round white magic carpets and tortilla smoke,” returning to “the end that is the beginning” of the poem.

Via its circular structure, Diaz's poem evokes ritual's life-preserving potential against the forces of entropy and erasure. Ritual is framed as a self-perpetuating cycle, like the cycles of biological life and of natural regeneration, promising sustenance and harmony between the natural and the cultural orders. Moreover, tortilla-making, in the poem's cosmological reordering, precedes not only colonization but also, in some sense, culture itself. In this way, it allows Native and Latinx people to survive the difficulties that the colonial apparatus places on them, or to metaphorically exist outside of them in perpetuity. The poem thus offers the possibility to carve a space in which historical conditions can be transcended by offering an alternate version of the beginning of the world that can project itself into the past as well as the future.

Monsters and supernatural beings are familiar elements of myths, legends, and folklore. Often shocking or spectacular and uncanny, such figures are invariably symbols or metaphors. Latinx legends and myths (El Chupacabra, La Llorona, and El Cuco) represent aspects of our diverse identities and sometimes painfully complicated histories, as does La Ciguapa, the titular star of Elizabeth Acevedo's poem.

The poem's foundational anaphora (repeated phrase) "they say" establishes the tone of a leyenda (legend) and speaks to how folklore spreads through oral (re)tellings as amusing anecdote, grassroots performances, and *bochinche* (gossip or rumor). With each "they say" we are offered new, sometimes differing accounts about La Ciguapa; each (re)telling of the La Ciguapa legend becomes a new attempt to "make sense of the world people could not control." She is formed and transformed into a multitude of metaphors that contend with issues of gender, race, and colonialism particular to the Dominican Republic, as Ginetta E. B. Candelario articulates in her essay "*La ciguapa y el ciguapeo*: Dominican Myth, Metaphor, and Method":

With backward-pointing feet offering a built-in mechanism for misleading those who follow, pursue, or attempt to grasp her, the ciguapa signals that Dominican social facts are often two opposite things at once, progreso (progress) and regreso (return), a

con/tradición (contradiction within tradition) and
contra/dición (against and counter diction).³

La Ciguapa represents the marginalized Indigenous and African presence on the island, and the poem devoted to her is a reclaiming and re-envisioning of the leyenda, making references to stories that overlap but are not always aligned with one another. La Ciguapa is said to have been born on Hispaniola's highest mountain (El Pico Duarte) as if made of the island itself: "crane legs, saltwater crocodile scales." But other tales recount her having been "made on one of those ships"—slave ships—and offered for sale (though no one will buy her) on "the auction / block." In this way, Acevedo places the myth at the heart of the island's complex history as the first place in the Americas where enslaved people were brought and sold. La Ciguapa seems to emerge out of the dark clash between the landscape, "an egg made of ocean," and the colonial violence that violently transfigured it and its peoples.

Moreover, Acevedo's poem centers La Ciguapa's elusive nature, how she has killed the men who have relentlessly pursued her: "They follow her none word sing-song / and try to climb her, tall and dark and rough as sugarcane / and don't know until they're whittled down how they've scraped / themselves dead." In her fatal magic, La Ciguapa is a symbol not only of historical trauma, out of which she seems to have sprung "entirely formed," but also of resistance. She is one of the "sacred monsters" whom the poem's speaker claims is falling into oblivion; against this forgetting, the poem revivifies the myth and, perhaps tacitly, the spirit of rebellion and liberation invoked by her refusal to be tamed and by her "long cry" and "burning hair."

We have seen how Latinx poets perform mythmaking with ritual and through the (re)invention of fantastic beings. With this last poem, let's consider how Latinx poetry can utilize the *fuerza* of myth in writing about place and environmental crisis.

³ Ginetta E. B. Candelario, "La ciguapa y el ciguapeo: Dominican Myth, Metaphor, and Method," *Small Axe* 20, no. 3 (Nov. 2016): 100–112.

“Sonata of the Luminous Lagoon” is a tale about the island of Puerto Rico. In the Nuyorican tradition from which I write, Puerto Rico has readily been idealized in epic fashion. Many Puerto Ricans born on the mainland (myself included) can feel rejected in the United States, which then sparks in us feelings of longing for the island that we only have a peripheral relationship with. This, in turn, can provoke the urge to idealize the island. Much of my first collection, which includes “Sonata of the Luminous Lagoon,” engages with this crisis of identity in the Nuyorican spirit. But by addressing similar questions on the importance of leyenda as these other Latinx poets, I am also attempting to do something else here. Because, as gestured in Diaz’s approach to the mythical vis-à-vis the historical, myth can be used to unearth and examine truths concealed by power and speak to contemporary geopolitical relations as the expression of centuries-old histories of imperialism and colonialism.

Puerto Rico, as the world’s oldest colony, has been kept in a state of perpetual servitude to other people’s empires: first the Spanish empire, then (and now) the U.S. empire. The mythmaking work of “Sonata of the Luminous Lagoon” is an attempt at illustrating the impact of U.S. intervention on the island, specifically its effect on the environment and the local inhabitants, its long-standing caretakers. To do this, I adopt an Indigenous Latinx conceptual model: the areyto. Boricua scholar Lisa Sánchez González defines the areyto (or areito) as “a communal get-together of song, dance, discussion, and strategic planning”⁴ in the form of a ritual group ceremony performed by the Taino, the people who populated the island at the time of the Spanish colonization. There is little known about the original areytos—only descriptions by invading Spaniards who understood very little about what they were witnessing—but they have come to function as symbol and metaphor for Caribbean Latinx writers and artists, myself included, who have worked to (re)create and (re)envision the areytos for a contemporary Latinx context.

This poem was conceived as part of an areyto that makes myth of a real place on the island known as the Phosphorescent

⁴ Lisa Sánchez González, *Boricua Literature: A Literary History of the Puerto Rican Diaspora* (New York: NYU Press, 2001): 170.

Bay, famous for containing a type of algae that glows at night—a characteristic that has unwittingly made it a tourist attraction. In this site, which I name the “Luminous Lagoon” in the book, a mythic battle for the soul and the people of the island is taking place. As in many leyendas, there are characters who serve as witnesses to record and pass on the tale to others. The witnesses here are the “Crickets, coquis” who testify to the devastation wrought by the imperialist tourism industry on the forest, ocean, and local pueblo. The record of this assault on the island unfolds through juxtaposed images: an island preserve encroached by “surf shops,” “coral” contorted into “cell phone ads,” “yucca fields” taken over by “spa resorts.” These juxtapositions mythologize the tensions between the natural world, Indigenous populations, and the colonial force that is the tourism industry. The poem as Latinx leyenda is intended to be a warning for anyone who might be too willing to accept the intrusive presence of the tourist/colonizer. But the poem ends with a turn, known in poetry as a “volta,” where the colonizers who have come to devour the environment and its prior inhabitants for their own leisure/pleasure are now being feasted on by those they sought to conquer; the “mosquitos” eating them represent a revolt and reclamation by the natural environment. Thus, “Sonata of the Luminous Lagoon” does the mythmaking work both of warning the community and of critiquing the oppressor by imagining the island of Puerto Rico as a space of mythic stature and value where human, ecological, and cosmological problems are confronted and contested.

These three poems address, in their distinct symbolic, cultural, and spiritual languages, the question of what work Latinx literature is doing. Among the many offerings given to us by Latinx poets, one might say that diasporic poetry can make of myth the “literature of the spirit,” of and for a people that have survived and thrived despite centuries of colonization. This mythmaking can help us to preserve our culture(s) and identity(s), and also provide us with new possibilities for imagining ourselves, our communities, and the places we come from or live in as Latinxs in a world and landscape rapidly being transfigured by the forces of colonial capitalism.

Discussion Questions

1. What are the different functions of myths or legends evoked in each poem? Which ones are drawn directly from folklore and which ones are expanded or invented by the poet? What are the different roles the myth plays in each poem?
2. What are the different ways in which the mythological or fantastical permeates the everyday in each poem?

Poems for further reading

Diego Bález, “Yaguareté White”

Rafael Campo, “My Voice”

Sandra Cisneros, “Loose Woman”

Ir’ene Lara Silva, “*dieta indígena*”

Rachel McKibbens, “drought (California)”

ADA LIMÓN

The End of Poetry

Enough of osseous and chickadee and sunflower
and snowshoes, maple and seeds, samara and shoot,
enough chiaroscuro, enough of thus and prophecy
and the stoic farmer and faith and our father and tis
of thee, enough of bosom and bud, skin and god
not forgetting and star bodies and frozen birds,
enough of the will to go on and not go on or how
a certain light does a certain thing, enough
of the kneeling and the rising and the looking
inward and the looking up, enough of the gun,
the drama, and the acquaintance's suicide, the long-lost
letter on the dresser, enough of the longing and
the ego and the obliteration of ego, enough
of the mother and the child and the father and the child
and enough of the pointing to the world, weary
and desperate, enough of the brutal and the border,
enough of can you see me, can you hear me, enough
I am human, enough I am alone and I am desperate,
enough of the animal saving me, enough of the high
water, enough sorrow, enough of the air and its ease,
I am asking you to touch me.

Poets

Elizabeth Acevedo (b. 1988) b. New York, NY, to Dominican immigrant parents. Raised in New York City. Earned BA in Performing Arts from George Washington University and MFA in Creative Writing from the University of Maryland. Taught eighth-grade English in Prince George's County, Maryland. Named National Poetry Slam Champion in 2014. Chapbook *Beastgirl & Other Origin Myths* was published in 2016; *Inheritance* appeared in 2022. Has won several awards for her young adult novels, including the National Book Award for *The Poet X* (2018).

Francisco X. Alarcón (1954–2016) b. Wilmington, CA, and grew up in Guadalajara, Mexico. Returned to Southern California at age seventeen. Earned BA from California State University, Long Beach, and MA from Stanford. Served as director of the Spanish for Native Speakers Program at the University of California, Davis, and taught for the California Poets in the Schools program. Publications include the poetry collections *De amor oscuro/Of Dark Love* (1991), the American Book Award–winning *Snake Poems: An Aztec Invocation* (1992), and *From the Other Side of Night/Del otro lado de la noche* (2002); among his books for children are the bilingual poetry collection *From the Bellybutton of the Moon and Other Summer Poems/Del ombligo de la luna: y otros poemas de verano* (1998). Winner of a Chicano Literary Prize and the Fred Cody Lifetime Achievement Award, and other honors.

William Archila (b. 1968) b. Santa Ana, El Salvador; immigrated with his family to the U.S. in 1980 following the outbreak of civil war the year before, living in Los Angeles. Worked as English teacher. Earned MFA from the University of Oregon. Books include *The Art of Exile* (2009), winner of the International Latino Book Award, and *The Gravedigger's Archaeology* (2015), winner of the Letras Latinas/Red Hen Poetry Prize.

Richard Blanco (b. 1968) b. Madrid, Spain, and raised in Miami, the son of Cuban exiles. Earned a BS in Civil Engineering and an MFA in Creative Writing from Florida International University. Publications include the poetry collections *City of a Hundred Fires* (1998), *Directions to the Beach of the Dead* (2005), *Looking for the Gulf Motel* (2012), *How to Love a Country* (2019), *Homeland of My Body: New and Selected Poems* (2023), as well as a memoir, *The Prince of Los Cocuyos: A Miami Childhood* (2014). He read his poem “One Today” at the inauguration for President Barack Obama’s second term in 2013. On August 14, 2015, he read his poem “Matters of the Sea/Cosas del mar” at the reopening ceremony for the United States Embassy in Havana. Appointed the first Poet Laureate of Miami-Dade County in 2022. Currently associate professor at Florida International University and education ambassador for the Academy of American Poets.

Lorna Dee Cervantes (b. 1954) b. San Francisco, CA, and raised in San José; of Mexican, Chumash, and Tarascan heritage. As a teenager took part in poetry workshops at San José State with Robert Hass. In 1974 an unscheduled reading of her poem “Refugee Ship” at a festival in Mexico City was publicized in newspapers and journals. Founded the small press Mango Publications in 1976. First poetry collection, *Emplumada* (1981), won an American Book Award. Stopped writing for several years in the wake of her mother’s murder in 1982; earned BA from San José State University in 1985, followed by PhD in the History of Consciousness from the University of California, Santa Cruz. *From the Cables of Genocide: Poems of Love and Hunger* (1991) won a Latino Literature Prize. Later books of poetry include *Drive: The First Quartet: New Poems, 1980–2005* (2006), *Ciento: 100 100-Word Love Poems* (2011), and *Sueño: New Poems* (2013). Co-editor of the poetry journal *Red Dirt*. Has taught at the University of Houston, the University of Colorado Boulder, where she directed the creative writing program, and the University of California, Berkeley.

Eduardo C. Corral (b. 1973) b. Casa Grande, AZ. Earned BA at Arizona State University and MFA at the University of Iowa’s Writers’ Workshop. With *Slow Lightning* (2012),

became the first Latino poet to win the Yale Series of Younger Poets award. *Guillotine* was published in 2020. Currently an associate professor in the MFA program at North Carolina State University.

Blas Manuel de Luna (b. 1969) b. Tijuana, Mexico; raised in Madera, CA. Received BA and MA from California State University, Fresno, and MFA from the University of Washington. Author of the poetry collection *Bent to the Earth* (2005).

Natalie Diaz (b. 1978) b. Fort Mojave Indian Village in Needles, CA. She is Mojave and an enrolled member of the Gila River Indian Tribe. Earned BA and MFA from Old Dominion University. Publications include *When My Brother Was an Aztec* (2012), winner of an American Book Award, and *Postcolonial Love Poem* (2020), winner of the Pulitzer Prize. Awarded fellowships from the MacArthur Foundation, among other honors. Elected a chancellor of the Academy of American Poets in 2021. Currently the Maxine and Jonathan Marshall Chair in Modern and Contemporary Poetry, a director at the Center for Imagination in the Borderlands, and a professor of English in the MFA program at Arizona State University.

Martín Espada (b. 1957) b. Brooklyn, NY. Puerto Rican father was a community organizer and photojournalist; mother was Jewish. Family moved to Long Island when he was sixteen. Earned BA from the University of Wisconsin–Madison and a JD from Northeastern University. Worked wide range of jobs, including as a groundskeeper in a minor-league baseball park, a radio journalist in Nicaragua, and an attorney representing low-income tenants in housing cases in the greater Boston area. First poetry collection, *The Immigrant Iceboy's Bolero* (1982), was published while he was a law student. Numerous subsequent collections include *Imagine the Angels of Bread* (1996), which won an American Book Award; *The Trouble Ball* (2011), winner of an International Latino Book Award; and the National Book Award–winning *Floater* (2021). Edited anthology *Poetry Like Bread: Poets of the Political Imagination* (1994) and was co-translator of *The Blood That Keeps Singing: Selected Poems of Clemente Soto Vélez* (1991). Also edited *What*

Saves Us: Poems of Empathy and Outrage in the Age of Trump (2019). Among his many honors is the 2018 Ruth Lilly Prize for lifetime achievement. Has long been a professor of English at the University of Massachusetts Amherst.

Gina Franco (b. 1968) b. Clifton-Morenci, AZ. Earned BA from Smith College and MFA and PhD from Cornell University. Author of the two poetry collections *The Keepsake Storm* (2004) and *The Accidental* (2019). Is also an oblate with the monastic order of the Community of St John. Teaches at Knox College.

Diana García (b. 1950) b. San Joaquin Valley, CA, in a migrant farm labor camp. Earned BA and MFA in Creative Writing from San Diego State University. Her book *When Living Was a Labor Camp* (2000) won an American Book Award for poetry. Co-edited *Fire and Ink: An Anthology of Social Action Writing* (2009). Has long taught at California State University, Monterey Bay.

Aracelis Girmay (b. 1977) b. Santa Ana, CA. Earned BA from Connecticut College and MFA from New York University. Her poetry collections are *Teeth* (2007), *Kingdom Animalia* (2011), and *The Black Maria* (2016). Editor of *How to Carry Water: Selected Poems of Lucille Clifton* (2020) and *So We Can Know: Writers of Color on Pregnancy* (2023). Taught at Hampshire College and is currently a professor of English at Stanford University.

Laurie Ann Guerrero (b. 1978) b. San Antonio, TX. Earned BA in English Language and Literature from Smith College and MFA in Poetry from Drew University, Madison, NJ. Poetry collections include *A Tongue in the Mouth of the Dying* (2013), recipient of an International Latino Book Award and the Andrés Montoya Poetry Prize; *A Crown for Gumecindo* (2015), a collaboration with the artist Maceo Montoya; and *I Have Eaten the Rattlesnake: New & Selected Poems* (2021). Served as Poet Laureate of San Antonio, 2014–16, and of Texas, 2016–17. Currently associate professor and writer-in-residence at Texas A&M University, San Antonio.

Victor Hernández Cruz (b. 1949) b. Aguas Buenas, Puerto Rico; moved to New York City at age five. As a teenager, cofounded Calle Once Publications, which published a small run of his first collection, *Papo Got His Gun! And Other Poems* (1966); several of its poems were then published in *Evergreen Review*. Became an editor of *Umbra* magazine and cofounded the East Harlem Gut Theater. Moved to Northern California in 1968. *Snaps* published by Random House in 1969. Later collections include *Red Beans* (1991), *Maraca: New and Selected Poems 1965–2000* (2001), and *Beneath the Spanish* (2017). Co-editor of *Paper Dance: 55 Latino Poets* (1995). Cofounded, with Ishmael Reed, the Before Columbus Foundation. Served as chancellor of the Academy of American Poets. Lives in Morocco and Puerto Rico.

Juan Felipe Herrera (b. 1948) b. Fowler, CA, to migrant farmers. Spent his years growing up moving throughout the San Joaquin and Salinas Valleys. Received BA in Anthropology at the University of California, Los Angeles, through the Educational Opportunity Program, an MA from Stanford University, and an MFA from the University of Iowa Writers' Workshop. Led a trip through Mexico with fellow Chicano artists, which greatly influenced his poetry. Publications include the novel-in-verse *Crashboomlove* (1999), which received the Americas Award; the poetry collections *187 Reasons Mexicans Can't Cross the Border: Undocuments 1971–2007* (2007), *Half of the World in Light: New and Selected Poems* (2008), and *Every Day We Get More Illegal* (2020); and the children's book *Jabberwalking* (2018), which won an International Latino Book Award. Has taught Chicano and Latin American studies and creative writing at California State University, Fresno, and University of California, Riverside. Holds honorary doctorate from California State University. His visual art has been featured in the Monterey Museum of Art. Recipient of a Latino Hall of Fame Award, he was also California's Poet Laureate, 2012–15, and U.S. Poet Laureate, 2015–17.

Darrel Alejandro Holnes (b 1987) b. Panama City, Panama. Received BA at the University of Houston and MFA at the University of Michigan. Publications include the chapbook

Migrant Psalms (2021) and the poetry collection *Stepmotherland* (2022), winner of the Andrés Montoya Poetry Prize. His plays have been produced at the Kennedy Center for the Arts American College Theater Festival, Kitchen Theater Company, Primary Stages, and elsewhere. Currently assistant professor of English at Medgar Evers College and part-time professor at New York University's Gallatin School of Individualized Study.

Ada Limón (b. 1976) b. Sonoma, CA. Earned MFA from New York University. Author of six poetry collections, including *The Carrying* (2018), which won a National Book Critics Circle Award. Hosted poetry podcast *The Slowdown*, September 2021–October 2022. Her many awards include a MacArthur fellowship. Appointed Poet Laureate of the United States in 2022. One of her poems will be engraved on NASA's Europa Clipper Spacecraft, scheduled to be launched in October 2024.

Pablo Medina (b. 1948) b. Havana, Cuba; moved to New York City with his family at age twelve. Received BA and MA from Georgetown University. Publications include the poetry collections *The Floating Island* (1999), *Points of Balance/Puntos de apoyo* (2005), and *The Man Who Wrote on Water* (2011); the memoir *Exiled Memories: A Cuban Childhood* (1990); and the novel *Cubop City Blues* (2012). Cotranslated Federico García Lorca's *Poet in New York* (2008) with Mark Statman. Professor Emeritus at Emerson College and former director of its creative writing MFA program.

Urayoán Noel (b. 1976) b. San Juan, Puerto Rico, and raised in Río Piedras. Earned BA in English from Universidad de Puerto Rico, Río Piedras, and MA and PhD in Spanish from Stanford University and New York University, respectively. Publications include the poetry collections *Kool Logic/La Lógica Kool* (2005), *Hi-Density Politics* (2010), and *Transversal* (2021); the critical study *In Visible Movement: Nuyorican Poetry from the Sixties to Slam* (2014), winner of the LASA Latino Studies Book Award; and translations of the Chilean poet Pablo de Rokha, *Architecture of Dispersed Life: Selected Poetry* (2018). Currently associate professor of English and Spanish at New York University.

José Olivarez (b. 1988) b. Chicago, IL, son of Mexican immigrants. Earned BA from Harvard University. Début collection, *Citizen Illegal* (2018), was followed by *Promises of Gold* (2023). Cohosted poetry podcast *The Poetry Gods*, 2016–17. Co-editor of the poetry anthology *The BreakBeat Poets, Vol. 4: LatiNEXT* (2020).

Willie Perdomo (b. 1967) b. New York, NY, of Puerto Rican descent. Earned MFA at Long Island University. Has published five poetry volumes, including *The Essential Hits of Shorty Bon Bon* (2014) and *Smoking Lovely: The Remix* (2021), as well as children's books. State Poet of New York, 2021–23. Teaches at Phillips Exeter Academy.

Pedro Pietri (1943–2004) b. Ponce, Puerto Rico. Moved to Spanish Harlem in early childhood. Served in the U.S. Army in the Vietnam War. Joined the Young Lords, a Puerto Rican civil rights organization; cofounded the Nuyorican Poets Café in the early 1970s. Became known for eccentric performances; nicknamed himself “Reverend” and carried leaflets of his poems in a suitcase labeled “Coffin for Rent.” Recorded two LPs in 1979, *One Is a Crowd* and *Loose Joints: Poetry by Pedro Pietri*. Books include the poetry collection *Puerto Rican Obituary* (1973) and the satirical play *The Masses are Asses* (1984). Was an AIDS activist. Died of stomach cancer.

Alberto Ríos (b. 1952) b. Nogales, AZ. Received BA and MFA from the University of Arizona. Began teaching at Arizona State University in 1982. His books include the poetry collections *Whispering to Fool the Wind* (1982), *The Smallest Muscle in the Human Body* (2002), and *Not Go Away Is My Name* (2020). *Capirotada: A Nogales Memoir* (1999) was given a Latino Literary Hall of Fame Award. Named Arizona's Poet Laureate in 2013, the state's first. Among his many honors are the Western Literature Association Distinguished Achievement award and election as chancellor of the Academy of American Poets. Currently Regents' Professor at Arizona State.

Mayra Santos-Febres (b. 1966) b. Carolina, Puerto Rico. Received BA from the University of Puerto Rico and MA

and PhD from Cornell University. The author of numerous books of poetry and prose, including *Anamú y maniqua* (1991), *El orden escapada* (1991), *Sirena Selena vestida de pena* (2000), *Nuestra Señora de la noche* (2006), winner of Puerto Rico's Premio Nacional de Literatura, and *Boat People* (2005), republished with translations by Vanessa Pérez- Rosario in 2021. A professor of creative writing at the University of Puerto Rico, Río Piedras, where she specializes in African, Caribbean, and feminist literature.

Vincent Toro (b. 1975) b. New York, NY; raised in northern New Jersey. Earned MFA at Rutgers University. Author of the poetry collections *Stereo Island Mosaic* (2016) and *Tertulia* (2020). Also a playwright. Director of performing arts and literature at the Guadalupe Cultural Arts Center, San Antonio, 2016–11. Is poetry editor at *Kweli Journal* and assistant professor in the English department at Rider University.

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Contributors

Daniel Borzutzky (b. 1974) b. Pittsburgh, PA, to Chilean parents. Received a BA in Philosophy from the University of Pittsburgh in 1997 and an MFA from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Short stories collected in *Arbitrary Tales* (2007). Poetry volumes include *The Book of Interfering Bodies* (2011), the National Book Award–winning *The Performance of Becoming Human* (2016), and *Written after a Massacre in the Year 2018* (2021); has translated works by Jaime Luis Huenún, Galo Ghigliotto, and Raúl Zurita. Currently teaches in the department of Latin American and Latino Studies at the University of Illinois Chicago.

Michael Dowdy is a professor in the Department of English at Villanova University where he teaches Latinx literature and culture. He is the author of the collection of poems *Urbilly*, the critical book *Broken Souths: Latina/o Poetic Responses to Neoliberalism and Globalization*, and with Claudia Rankine, co-editor of the critical anthology *American Poets in the 21st Century: Poetics of Social Engagement*. He has been a faculty fellow at the CUNY Graduate Center and editor of the journal *Litmosphere*.

Lauro Flores is professor of Chicano and Latin American Literatures and Cultures at the University of Washington, Seattle. He has been chair of American Ethnic Studies, director of the Center for Chicano Studies, chair of Latin American Studies, and acting chair of Spanish and Portuguese Studies. His publications include *The Floating Borderlands: Twenty-Five Years of U.S. Hispanic Literature*; a critical edition of Luis Pérez's novel, *El Coyote/The Rebel*; *Alfredo Arreguín: Patterns of Dreams and Nature/Diseños, sueños y naturaleza*; and *Beyond Aztlán: Mexican & Chicana/o Artists in the Pacific Northwest*, among others. He was previously the editor of *The Americas Review*.

Rigoberto González is Distinguished Professor of English at Rutgers University in Newark where he directs its MFA program in Creative Writing. His books of poetry include *The Book of Ruin*, *Unpeopled Eden*, *Black Blossoms*, and *So Often the Pitcher Goes to Water until It Breaks*. He is also the author of the memoir *Butterfly Boy: Memories of a Chicano Mariposa*, the novel *Crossing Vines*, and the book of stories *Men without Bliss*. He is the editor of Alurista's *Xicano Duende: A Select Anthology* (2011) and *Camino del Sol: Fifteen Years of Latina and Latino Writing* (2010) and a contributing editor for *Poets & Writers Magazine*.

Víctor Macías-González is professor of History and Race, Gender, and Sexuality Studies at the University of Wisconsin-La-Crosse where he is the College of Arts, Social Sciences, and Humanities Faculty Fellow for Diversity and Inclusion. He is the co-editor of the book *Masculinity and Sexuality and Modern Mexico* and the author of several essays and articles in the United States, Spain, and Mexico.

Eliza Rodriguez is professor of Chicana/o and Latina/o Studies at Loyola Marymount University and Bellarmine College of Liberal Arts associate dean for DEI and Faculty Development. She is the co-author of *Funny Looking: Humor, Queer Latina/o Camp, and Ugly Betty*, the editor of *Stunned Into Being: Essays on the Poetry of Lorna Dee Cervantes*, and co-editor of *The Un/making of Latina/o Citizenship: Culture, Politics, and Aesthetics*. She was the co-editor of *Chicana/Latina Studies: The Journal of Mujeres Activas en Letras y Cambio Social*. She has published multiple essays and articles.

For Urayoán Noel and Vincent Toro, see *Poets*, pp. 155 and 157.